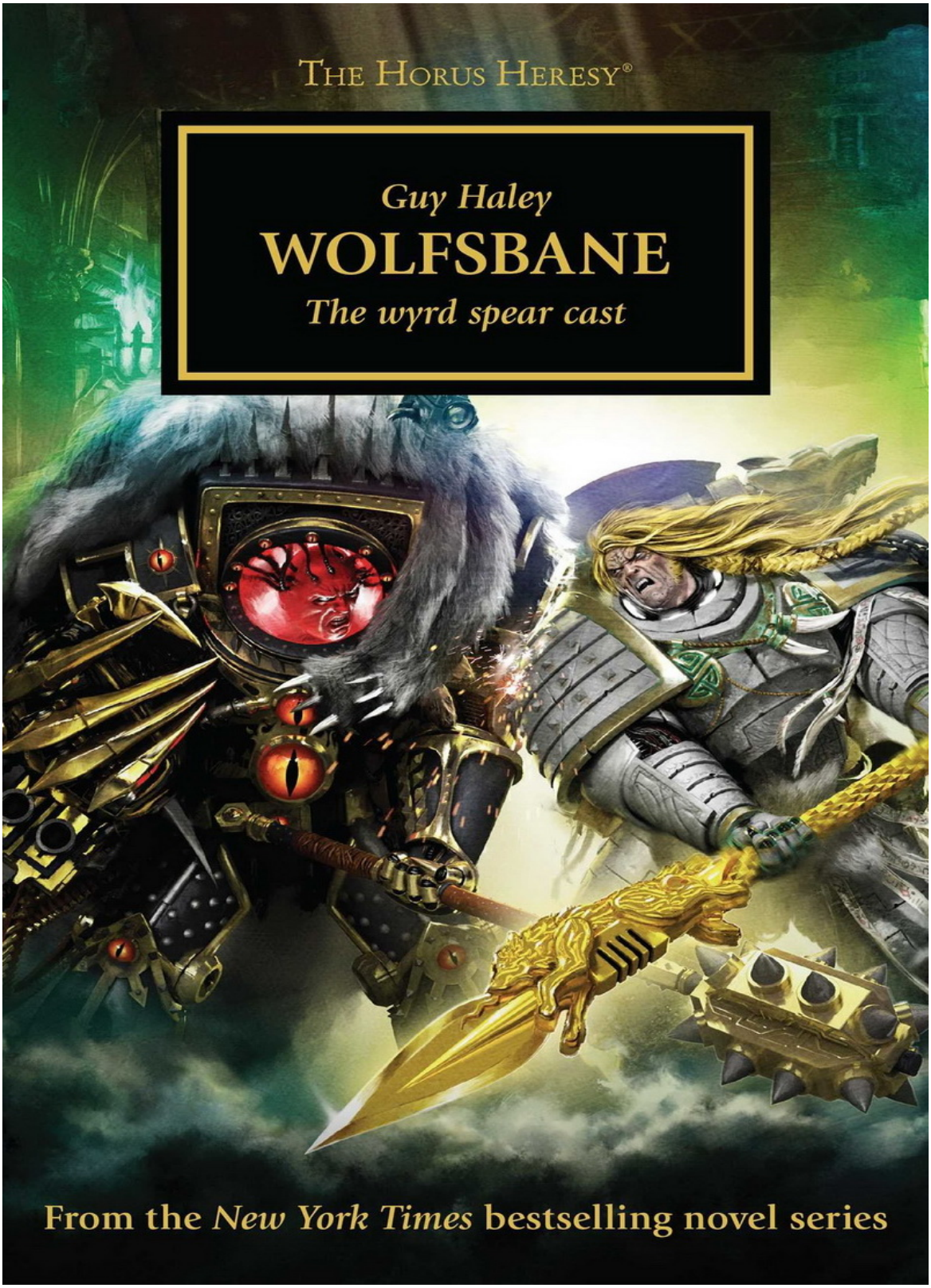
THE HORUS HERESY®

Guy Haley

WOLFSBANE

The wyrd spear cast

From the *New York Times* bestselling novel series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THE HORUS HERESY®

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THE HORUS HERESY

It is a time of legend.

The galaxy is in flames. The Emperor's glorious vision for humanity is in ruins. His favoured son, Horus, has turned from his father's light and embraced Chaos.

His armies, the mighty and redoubtable Space Marines, are locked in a brutal civil war. Once, these ultimate warriors fought side by side as brothers, protecting the galaxy and bringing mankind back into the Emperor's light. Now they are divided.

Some remain loyal to the Emperor, whilst others have sided with the Warmaster. Pre-eminent amongst them, the leaders of their thousands-strong Legions are the primarchs. Magnificent, superhuman beings, they are the crowning achievement of the Emperor's genetic science. Thrust into battle against one another, victory is uncertain for either side.

Worlds are burning. At Isstvan V, Horus dealt a vicious blow and three loyal Legions were all but destroyed. War was begun, a conflict that will engulf all mankind in fire. Treachery and betrayal have usurped honour and nobility. Assassins lurk in every shadow. Armies are gathering. All must choose a side or die.

Horus musters his armada, Terra itself the object of his wrath. Seated upon the Golden Throne, the Emperor waits for his wayward son to return. But his true enemy is Chaos, a primordial force that seeks to enslave mankind to its capricious whims.

The screams of the innocent, the pleas of the righteous resound to the cruel laughter of Dark Gods. Suffering and damnation await all should the Emperor fail and the war be lost.

The age of knowledge and enlightenment has ended.
The Age of Darkness has begun.

~ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ~

The Emperor

Rogal Dorn, Primarch, Imperial Fists

Jaghatai Khan, Primarch, White Scars

Malcador the Sigilite, Regent of Terra

Sanguinius, Primarch, Blood Angels

Constantin Valdor, Custodian Guard

Ezekyle Abaddon, First Captain, Sons of Horus

Horus Lupercal, Primarch, Sons of Horus

Knights Errant

Garviel Loken

Bror Tyrfingr

Space Wolves

Leman Russ, Primarch

Bjorn the One-Handed

Ogvai Ogvai Helmschrot, Jarl of Tra

Lufven Close-Handed, Jarl of For

Amlodhi Skarssen Skarssensson, Jarl of Fyf

Skunnr, Jarl of Sesc

Hvarl Red-Blade, Jarl of Sepp

Baldr Vidunsson, Jarl of For-Twa

Sturgard Joriksson, Jarl of Tra-Tra

Laughing Jaurmag of Tolv, Previous Jarl of Tolv

Scarred Oki, Jarl of Tolv

Jorin Bloodhowl, Jarl of Dekk-Tra

Kva, 'Who-is-Divided', Rune Priest

Grimnr Blackblood, Huscarl

Freki and Geri, Wolf-brothers of Leman Russ

Fith Godsmote, Battle-brother to Bjorn

Denizens of the Underverse

The Erlking, Malevolent psychic echo

Amarok, Guesting daemonkin

Bror Tyrfingr's pack

Blind Ragner

Himmlik

Enrir the Fat

Chattering Flokr

Gren the Happy

Mechanicum

Friedisch Adum Ship Qvo, Tech-Acolytum

Belisarius Cawl, Tech-Acolytum

Hester Aspertia Sigma-Sigma, Magos Domina of the Trisolian Taghmata

Tez-Lar, Cawl's pet servitor

Benician Mendoza, Viceroy Extractatorian of the Trisolian Forge World

Sota-Nul, Emissary of the True Mechanicum

Kelbor-Hal, Fabricator-General, Martian faction

Diort, A skitarii

PROLOGUE

Firstborn Child

'I have something for you, Horus.'

That was the message the Emperor sent to Horus Lupercal. That was the beginning of the end of his solitude.

Soon after, Horus found he had a new brother.

Horus guessed something momentous was coming. The Master of Terra had disappeared on a mysterious errand He would not speak to His first son about. Horus knew the Emperor had made twenty sons. It did not take a man of Horus' genius to put together the pieces, but he had only known with certainty that the first of the others had been found when the Emperor's fleet broke warp and approached his own. He felt it then. He could feel *him*.

The Emperor greeted Horus in an annular observation gallery circling the dome of a refectorum. The gallery was an architectural fancy, a self-conscious mimicking of the cathedrals of Old Earth. To Horus' critical eye it was a weakness in the ship, and should not have been included. There should have been a firmer divide between utility and beauty. The Emperor disagreed.

That day, however, the gallery served a useful purpose.

Father and son looked through curved armourglass at the group of feral men occupying the refectorum tables sixty metres below. Amid the opulence of the Emperor's ship the newcomers were incongruous. They were shaggy-maned, draped in filthy pelts, armoured in leather and iron-ringed byrnies over clothes whose rough weave appeared shockingly primitive under the even, artificial light. Their muscles were as big as mortal man's could be; they were hard men, warriors born, but unsophisticated. Their tattooed skin was dirty, their hair was filthier still. Their scent was kept from Horus, but they looked like they stank, and he wrinkled his nose as if he could smell them.

They behaved like children, toying with the glassware and the lamps that adorned the tables. They laughed like fools when they worked out how to activate a lumen; they laughed louder when the primitive playing with it dropped and broke it. They sniffed at fine wine and expensive foods with suspicious faces, laughed again at the fussy dishes of delicacies presented to them by servers they delighted in harassing. They were insolent, unworthy, scoffing at the Emperor's

largesse. Horus glanced at his father, but the Emperor did not share his affront, His perfect, luminous face radiating nothing but pride.

The Emperor's eyes were fixed on their leader, the greatest of them all. He was a giant almost as massive as Horus himself. Though he was draped in the same rude skins and armour as his followers; though his long, blond hair was dressed in similar backward style to theirs; though he hunched over the table and picked at the kingly food with grubby fingers, ignoring the cutlery provided, it was clear as day is from night that he was not the same as his followers.

He was the same as Horus. This was the presence he felt.

This *savage* was his brother.

Horus stared at the barbarian king. No fraternal feeling came to him. Instead he was flooded with dismay. By his brother's feet lay two enormous animals one a grey so glossy it was almost silver, the other black. They appeared to have no difficulty accepting their new environment and slept easily on the floor.

'Are those actual wolves?' Horus said, fascinated despite himself.

'After a fashion,' said the Emperor. He spared His son a brief, benevolent look. 'They resemble the animals of Old Earth, though l think you would find the Terran species disappointingly small if you ever saw one.'

'They look like wolves,' said Horus. He thought of his own Legion's badge, and his warriors' lupine affectations. They seemed trite and false by comparison to the men below. They were human wolves, walking on two feet. 'They live with wolves?' he said.

'They believe themselves kin to them. Wolves are important to their culture,' said the Emperor.

'These men are primitives,' said Horus guardedly. He tried to look past his prejudice to their potential. They were strong, and if they were as proficient in combat as they looked, would make excellent recruits for the Legions. At the same time, the idea of these brutes let loose in the stars appalled him. He tried to smother the emotion, but it squirmed in his mental grip and would not die. Of course his father read his mind. Of course.

The Emperor smiled, an expression felt more than seen. 'Are the gangs of Cthonia more civilised than these men? Are the techno-barbarians of Terra who fight in my name?'

One of the warriors was tapping at a decanter with a dirty fingernail, puzzled by the glass. A roar of laughter went up from his fellows as he accidentally pushed it from the table and it shattered on the marble floor. Glass skittered across the hall. Priceless purple amasec soaked into irreplaceable rugs.

'They know of war with guns,' said Horus. 'The Cthonians know technology. The stars were no mystery to us. These *men* carry swords of plain steel.' He avoided saying the word savages aloud, only just.

'Their highest art is the forging of steel,' admitted the Emperor. 'Their world has regressed to a pre-technological state, and if you saw it you would not be surprised why. It is a beautiful, savage place of ice, fire and monsters. A charming experiment in reconstructed mythologies.'

'What do you mean?'

'Fenris is a relic from the days before Old Night.'

Rarely did the Emperor refer to the past, even so obliquely as that. 'Are they fit to serve you, my lord?' asked Horus. He hurried on before the Emperor could reply. 'They will take much training. Think of the acclimatisation period. We have wiped out cultures more sophisticated than theirs. We should do the same to them.' It was a plausible lie. His objections to these wolf-kin were rooted elsewhere entirely, and he was ashamed of that.

'We have killed many similar societies, but we have welcomed hundreds more worlds like theirs into the Imperium. Fenris has complied. There will be no purge.'

Horus was bereft. He was no longer alone. He should not care, but he did. He was embarrassing himself.

Sensing his son's resentment the Emperor rested a hand on Horus' shoulder. The touch sent shivers into Horus' soul. Loving devotion welled in his hearts that he could not deny, try as he might.

'I understand your disappointment,' the Emperor said, amused. 'You and I have fought side by side for years. It is natural for you to feel this…' The Emperor's humour grew. Horus basked in it like he would the sunlight, even as it burned him. '…sibling rivalry. But I need him. We need him. He was made by me as you were. He is a brother for you, if you like. Brotherly competition is to be encouraged, because it will drive you on to greater efforts.'

The Emperor required Horus to look at Him, so Horus did.

'I know he is a little rough around the edges. Would you believe he challenged me to an eating contest?' The Emperor laughed softly. 'But I will tolerate no dissension between you. You are to cooperate. You must learn to make war together. I am relying on you to help me civilise him.'

'Impossible. He is a savage,' said Horus, unable to keep the word to himself any longer.

'I advise you not to underestimate him, Horus,' said the Emperor. 'He is woven from the same genetic threads that you are. He has conquered half a world a hundred times more savage than Cthonia. Had I not found him and taken him from his people, all of Fenris would have been his. The feat that would have been.' Once more, he smiled. 'Impressive. Do not underestimate him,' he repeated.

Horus' will buckled under the force of the Emperor's attention, but his misgivings would not retreat. He looked into his father's face. Few could do that.

A poisonous worry gripped him that this new warrior would be able to do the same, that he was no longer unique. He was jealous, he realised. He would have to share the golden attentions of his father with another. The years they'd shared seemed reduced to an eye-blink. He thought they would last for all time, and just like that they were done. In that moment, everything changed forever.

'He could turn against you.' Horus suppressed a tremble in his voice.

'He will not,' said the Emperor with certainty. 'He will be as loyal as you are. His efforts will multiply yours, when he takes command of his Legion. Two of you, striding the heavens!' The Emperor was pleased. 'This is a propitious day.'

'You are going to give him a Legion?' said Horus. 'Forgive me, father, but is that wise?'

'I gave the gang lord of Cthonia his. It was your birthright, as it is his.'

Horus dropped his eyes. The Emperor radiated a sense of such wisdom. Once more, Horus was ashamed to have questioned Him.

'You are entitled to your misgivings, Horus,' said the Emperor. 'But you must make this work. He is only the first.'

I am the first, thought Horus before he could stop himself.

'If I can find him, and you, then the others will be located eventually. You must grow used to the idea that you are no longer alone.' His father was pleased by that thought. Horus could not be.

'If I cannot trust you to learn how to work with the others, and lead them as the first of my sons, then I have overestimated you,' the Emperor said.

He said it blandly, but the thought of disappointing his father struck Horus with a panicked dread. 'I will not fail you, father,' he swore. 'I shall befriend him. I shall help you teach him.'

The servers providing meat and drink to the warriors were mocked and chased about by the barbarians. They were frightened, and no threat whatsoever to the burly primitives. When a high-ranking warrior of the VI Legion entered the hall the situation was different. The warriors ceased their clownish antics the instant the door opened. They went from tribal buffoons to battle-ready warriors in the space of an eye-blink.

Horus leaned forwards. 'Now that,' he breathed, 'is remarkable.' The Emperor nodded. 'Enoch Rathvin meets his gene-father. It is only fair that he be the first to greet him. I hope you are not offended that you will be second.'

The men showed no sign of the Legiones Astartes dread as the legionary approached them. Instead they appraised him for weakness. They tracked his every movement with their eyes, hands loosely curled around axe throats and sword hilts. Powerful though they were, the Fenrisians were small compared to the armoured legionary. They did not understand the raptor head insignia and battle honours that marked Rathvin out as the master of the VI Legion, and a

great warrior in his own right. Nevertheless, the barbarians were a threat to him. Like the wolves they aped, they were dangerous enough alone, but deadly in pack, even to much larger creatures like Rathvin.

There were similarities between Horus' legion and the king's men, Horus was forced to admit.

Between primarchs and legionary there was tension of a different sort. They could not help staring at each other. Like recognised like. Horus stifled a snort of derision. Was his barbarian kin actually sniffing at the air? Could he smell his gene-seed in this warrior? He shut down his contempt. Why should he assume this warrior would be the same as him exactly?

The savage king grasped Rathvin by his shoulders, and looked him up and down. The vox pick-ups for the gallery emitters were inactive, and so the king's words to the man he would ultimately replace went unheard. The master of the VI nodded, and knelt, head bowed, at the foot of his primarch.

The warriors did not laugh this time. They stood stock-still, wary as wolves at the forest's fringe when confronted with a bear.

'Enoch Rathvin pays his fealty to his gene-father without a second thought,' said Horus. 'I expected more resistance from him. He is proud.'

'Your sons were no different when I gave them to you,' said the Emperor. His golden eyes were fixed on the encounter playing out below.

Rathvin stood. The Fenrisians and the Terran stared at each other with mutual suspicion. Rathvin left. Only after he had been gone for several minutes did they relax, and even then they did not return to their light-hearted state, but paced, primed for action.

'So, Horus, will you meet your brother?'

Horus glanced up at his creator.

'Yes,' he said.

'Then go to him,' said the Emperor, gesturing down at the hall.

Horus turned back to the refectorum.

His brother was looking right at him, grinning like the savage he was.

The primarchs met alone in a stateroom. The savage king's escort were not happy at being separated from their lord, and it had taken some time to accomplish. In the end the king had half cajoled and half jested his men away. The production of a large vat of beer, dragged out of the ship's stores, had helped.

The new primarch seemed less primitive without his clansmen. His clothes were the same, of course, and although his men were away from his side his wolves were not. But his bearing was different now he was unobserved by his warriors, so much so that his garb suddenly seemed like an elaborate costume for a masquerade.

He was standing, facing the door, when Horus arrived.

Ice-blue eyes locked with brown.

Horus stood in the doorway a fraction of a second too long to convey complete confidence. He looked at the Wolf King, and the Wolf King looked at him.

Horus' brother broke the impasse.

'So you're the first, eh?' The lord of Fenris had a guttural accent that invested his Gothic with ridiculous snarls and growls, like a beast attempting speech. 'Our… father?' He said the word questioningly, as if he was new to the concept. 'He told me about you and all the rest of mine kin. He said we will be friending. What again was your name?' He smiled. He obviously knew the answer. Such an obvious probe annoyed Horus.

Horus put aside his petty feelings. There was more to this man than met the eye. He would be an asset to the Great Crusade, if he could be properly tamed. Horus made himself see it and accept it.

'I am Horus, primarch of the Sixteenth Legion, the Luna Wolves. Who are you?'

'You are wolf?' said the warrior. Lips peeled back from sharp teeth.

'We are both wolf, I am named Leman, King of the Russ.' Russ slapped his chest as if the title were noteworthy. 'But I am more than this, think I.' He became thoughtful 'I have always knowed I not of Fenris.'

'Known,' said Horus.

'Ja,' said the warrior king, 'Sorry, I learned your language only five days ago.'

Horus raised an eyebrow at that. It was an impressive feat.

'You know of the Crusade?' said Horus. The room had been set out for a meeting of minds. There were comfortable chairs in the room made for a primarch's stature. They both remained standing.

'I do know of this war. The… Emperor?' he said, again slightly questioningly. 'He has told me what I am, and what I made for.'

'Do you agree with His aims?' said Horus.

'An empire in the stars? Who could not agree with that?' said Leman of the Russ. 'If I did not, I would come along for adventure. No one of the Russ make murder in the *Uppland*.' Russ held a cup he did not drink from, lightly gripping the rim with his giant's fingers. 'But I have no choice. It is written in my *wyrd*.'

Horus' face expressed an unspoken question.

Russ searched for an appropriate translation. 'My fate, though it is more than that.'

'We do not believe in fate.'

'This is the Imperial Truth? This the Emperor also says to me on our trip here. An interesting idea,' he said, as if he had evaluated and rejected the concept. 'The Imperial Truth,' he repeated, changing the emphasis as if trying out which way suited him best.

'You do not believe it?' said Horus.

Leman of the Russ shrugged. 'When gods come from the sky and tell you there are no gods, it takes little time to see what is true and what is not.'

'And what do you think is true?'

'I think a believer who ceases to believe when the truth of his world confirms those beliefs is a fool,' he said simply, 'It doesn't matter what gods say. We don't pay much attention to them. They are as drunk and stupid as we.' He grinned.

The warrior knew exactly what Horus thought of him.

Do not underestimate him. The Emperor's words came back to Lupercal.

'That will change,' said Horus. 'You will see that the Imperial Truth is correct. The Emperor is a man, a great man, but He is a man. He is not a god.'

Russ shrugged again and then he drained his cup. 'My people already call Him the Allfather - they believe Him the king of our gods. My warriors out there believe they are in the Oververse, in Uppland.'

'Where?'

'The afterlife,' said Russ with a feral glee, daring Horus to guess whether he believed this himself or not.

'There is no afterlife,' said Horus. 'This place is as real as your world. I am glad to meet you, Leman, King of the Russ. We shall grow to be great comrades, I am sure.' He held out his hand.

Russ grinned more widely. The meeting amused him. That annoyed Horus. He wanted this backwoods chieftain to show him more respect. But Horus had always hidden his feelings well.

Russ grasped his hand hard. There was amazing strength in the grip.

'We shall be brothers,' said the Wolf King.

'I am sure you have much to discuss with our father. I shall see you soon.' Horus dipped his head and was about to walk through the door when the savage king called out.

'Hey, Horus of the Luna Wolves! On my world, it is common for brothers to fight. Do you think, my brother, that we might fight?'

'I will spar with you, if that is what you wish,' said Horus.

'No! Fight!' said the King of the Russ. He mimed a bizarre wrestler's crouch, his hands clawed and teeth bared. 'Who would win, eh?'

'We are brothers. We will not fight.'

'Ah, go on,' said Russ. 'Think about it.' His bluff manner was already trying Horus' patience, so soon into their relationship. 'If we fought, who would win?'

Horus smiled coldly at his foundling brother. 'I would.'

Leman of the Russ smiled and nodded thoughtfully.

'Perhaps you would,' he said. 'Perhaps one day, we shall see.'

ONE

A Company Of Wolves

Of all the surviving members of Malcador's Chosen sent to Molech, Garviel Loken was the last to be called to the Wolf King's presence. Macer Varren and Proximo Tarchon had been summoned first. Ares Voitek had been woken for a while from his healing sleep to attend upon the primarch of the Space Wolves, and the human Rahua revealed reluctantly that even he had been to the *Hrafnkel*. His reluctance was understandable. A mere human was given such a great honour before Garviel Loken, agent Alpha-Prime of the Knights Errant. Loken was left on Titan and wondering if his lack of summons were a good or a bad thing.

Loken spent the waiting time wisely. There were things to do. There were always things to do, not least submitting to endless interrogations by Malcador's agents. The questioning was understandable He had been in the presence of the Warmaster, his gene-father. As the interrogations occupied only a portion of his days, he was permitted to take up his duties between interviews. These occupied a portion more.

He still had too much time on his hands.

The mind of a legionary is capacious, and despite his allotted tasks, there remained plenty of space for doubt: why had he not been brought before Russ?

When the call finally came it was a relief, although he knew there was a chance the meeting could end in his death.

He came from Titan by fast ship to Terra's orbit. He rode on the command deck all the way, clad in his armour as if he were heading into battle, standing beside the command throne so motionless and stern he seeded disquiet among the small crew.

The ship cut over the plane of the ecliptic. Mars and Terra were in opposition. The lights of the ships blockading the red planet made it seem that there were a dozen worlds attended by a hundred additional moons.

Constant vox-chatter whispered from the comms stations. Sol's void space was crammed with starships. Activity in the system had reached a fever pitch. Now the warp storms had begun to abate, Dorn anticipated Horus would launch an attack soon, and so the home system of mankind prepared feverishly for battle.

Terra appeared as a star at first, a singular albedo shine that split into dozens then hundreds of lesser lights as Loken's ship approached. Russ' ships were

moored at the high anchor halo of resupply stations and dry docks, where the battered remnants of the VI and V Legions' once mighty fleets underwent hurried repairs.

Codes were transmitted and received. Without slowing, the cutter headed directly for the largest ship, a Gloriana-class behemoth swaddled in mending frames, closely overlapped like bandages over its wounds.

The *Hrafnkel*, Leman Russ' flagship and one of the most powerful vessels in the whole galaxy.

They touched down on the embarkation deck. Loken was away before the engines had finished their cooling cycle.

A clamour of industry roared into the cutter as the gang ramp descended. Clattering metal and machine tool whines and the grinding shrieks of blades cutting into plasteel assaulted Loken's hearing. The stink of burning metal filled the place end to end, vast though it was. Sparks fountained in arcs like geysers of lava. Sheets of plastek as tall as Titan banners wafted in hot breezes blowing from the ship's depths. Menials in the heavy environment suits of the Terran Stevedores and Shipwrights Guilds were at work everywhere, aided by barbarous-looking Fenrisian menials who wore primitive leather masks beneath their visors. Loken halted at the base of the cutter's ramp to avoid a heavy repair rig rumbling down the embarkation deck's central road. The servitor drivers wired into the cab stared blankly ahead. A group of Mechanicum adepts followed, directing the machine by means of a remote control box implanted into the chest of a vast brute who was linked to the cogitators aboard by a long, flexed umbilicus covered in rubberised plastek.

The machine chugged past, and Loken set foot upon oily deck plating. The place was so gloomy he thought there was a malfunction in the lighting circuits, but as he looked into the cathedral spaces of the deck he saw chandeliers with every lumen globe intact. It was purposefully dim.

As his eyes adjusted he saw how badly damaged the *Hrafnkel* was. Repair gangs and heavy plant took the place of gunships and drop pods in the landing circles. Men shouted. Metal scaffold poles were dumped by a hauler, clanging to the deck in a raucous bell peal. Since his return to Terra, Russ had not been idle. He had been out patrolling the Solar reaches beyond the outermost defence sphere. He had ventured beyond the system and fought the campaign at Daverant Reach and the battle at Vanaheim. If he did those things in this wreck, thought Loken, he must be as reckless as they say.

A cohort of dry dock workers jogged in front of him, faceplates misted with breath, brass boots thudding on metal. When they had passed Loken saw a savage figure staring at him across the main roadway of the embarkation deck. He had not been there before. He was a legionary that much was certain, but so

barbarously dressed only his size and his bearing separated him from the lesser men in their furs and leathers labouring alongside the Terran work gangs. A wolf pelt hung from heavy silver brooches set at his shoulders. The skin lay over a full suit of close-fitting leather that covered him head to toe. The dozens of expertly cut panels mimicked the exposed musculature of a flayed man. It was the brown of flesh left to desiccate in dry highlands. Armour was a generous word for it. The leather was hard, but too full of joins and easy holes for swords to find to offer real protection, and would give none at all against more advanced weapons. But it was impressive. Firelight caught on the edges, gleaming off the involute knotwork covering every part. A mask fashioned into a bestial muzzle hid the warrior's face. Eyes glinted in the darkness beneath. The flash of a hunting beasts eyes from the thicket before a furred weight bears you to the ground and hot breath heralds death.

The figure approached. Loken instinctively braced for combat.

The warrior's red beard parted to show fanged teeth, and he laughed.

'My friend!' said the warrior. 'You are a little edgy today. I bid you welcome to the *Hrafnkel*, flagship and domain of Leman Russ, the Great Wolf, the Wolf King, the Lord of Winter and War!'

Confusion overtook Loken.

'Bror Tyrfingr, is that you?'

'Aye, who did you expect?' Bror slapped Loken hard on his pauldron. 'The Allfather Himself?' Bror held out his hand, Loken took his forearm. Leather glove gripped ceramite plate. 'It is good to see you, Loken.'

'When you left Titan, I thought you might never come back. I see I was right.' Loken gestured at Tyrfingr's leather suit. 'You are leaving us then,' he said. 'To rejoin your master.'

'No, no, my friend,' said Bror. 'I was commanded by my king to join Malcador's private army, and there I will remain until told otherwise. My loyalty is to the regent now. He is my *jarl*,' he said, the foreign word a wet, guttural growl in his throat. 'But Leman of the Russ will forever be my primarch. He is my father. I visit with him to renew bonds of kinship and fealty, and to discuss the coming attack upon the Warmaster. I will return to Malcador's side soon enough. We shall fight together again, you and I, I swear it.'

Loken suspected Bror had returned to report on his new master to his old. Russ had a hunger for intelligence that matched Malcador's. He refrained from saying so.

'Why are you dressed in that way?'

'Ha!' Bror slapped the leather panels covering his iron-hard stomach. 'Like a member of the *Vlka Fenryka* you mean?'

'This is what Space Wolves wear?'

'When we are among our own, aye.' Tyrfingr glanced up. 'My friend, I advise you, only those not of Fenris use the term 'Space Wolf'.'

'I apologise if I disrespect you,' said Loken.

There had always been bonds of brotherhood between the different Legions. The Space Wolves defied them in their oddness. They were a breed apart, as isolated as the Khan's White Scars, and more savage. They were made of the same raw matter, Loken and Tyrfingr, but the mould they were stamped from was so very different.

'If I took offence at that,' said Bror, 'I would have to commit to feud with the entire galaxy. Just try not to say 'Space Wolf' aboard this ship. You will seem ignorant. The Rout does not take kindly to ignorance, and they will not take you seriously.'

They left the embarkation deck by a set of large doors and headed upwards into the ship. Loken had been aboard many Gloriana-class vessels. They were all of a pattern, but the Space Wolves had made the ship their own as much as they possibly could, tearing it bloodily from the grasp of reason and refashioning it in their own, superstitious tribal image. Other Legions favoured polished stone, gleaming metal and glass to line their halls. The Space Wolves covered the metal walls with carved wood and bone sheets so large they could only have been harvested from monsters. The greater halls had elaborate interiors of wolf-headed posts and panelling decorated with entwined beasts whose contortions inevitably ended in the fanged mouths of their fellows. Even lesser ways too unimportant for wholesale decoration acknowledged the character of the Legion: mossy rocks in bubbling pools of water, bunches of dried herbs tied up in bundles hanging from the ceiling, primitive weapons chained to the walls, as if imprisoned.

For all its size, the *Hrafnkel* had the atmosphere of a chieftain's hall. The air was scented with smoke and poorly preserved meat, herbs, burned fat, wet fur, and the hot, musky smell of animals sleeping in their dens.

Its corridors were as likely to be lit by flickering torches as they were lumen strips or biolume panels. Fire bowls guttered in the suction winds of atmospheric recyc units, the walls behind them furred with soot.

'You like it dark,' said Loken.

'Too much light dulls the senses,' said Bror. 'If you think this is dark, you would hate the *Aett*.' Another phlegm-rich word, more growled than spoken. If the Fenrisian language had a relationship to Imperial Gothic, it was obscure.

'The what?'

Tyrfingr chuckled throatily. 'The Fang. They call it the Fang. Only don't say that either. It's the Aett, or nothing.'

The illusion of a savage king's demesne would have been total had it not broken in many places, showing the technology beneath. Patchwork repairs made

after Alaxxes had been undone by the ship's recent forays beyond the Solar perimeter. New scars piled atop old wounds; the ship was damaged through and through. Whole sections were sealed off. Drifts of wood ash intermingled with mortals' bones where fires had broken through bulkheads and torched compartments. In other sections, the Space Wolves' primitive cladding had been ripped out to enable access to the guts of the ship. Beating hammers had the *Hrafnkel* shivering with a fever's trembles. It was a giant beast, wounded close to death. It would be decades before it was brought back to its full capabilities.

Loken had heard Leman Russ intended to leave within the week.

Tyrfingr took Loken further into the ship, and the damage became less apparent, though it was never entirely absent. They ascended damp stairways and lifters whose mechanisms struggled against shafts bent out of true. After a time they reached the spinal way, the great stem-to-stem thoroughfare that all grand starships possessed.

Even there, below the towering windows, where a transit monorail ran with shushing haste, and ornate gates led to the palaces of astrotelepathy, astrogation, weapons control, the enginarium and other vasty domains, the sense of a primitive settlement remained strong. Every few hundred metres carved menhirs, their bases still dirty with alien soil, stood sentinel in recesses which in other Legions' ships statues might occupy. Loken had seen few of Bror's brothers until they reached the spinal way, where they thronged in some numbers. Most wore segmented leather costumes and masks. They were similar to Bror's in the broadest sense, but no patterns were the same. Each was a unique expression of the warrior encased inside. The leather suits were more individual to each man than a human face. Fantastic beasts fashioned from hide stared at Loken as he walked by, and he felt out of place in his clean, grey power armour. Those few legionaries wearing their war gear were hardly less outlandish, for the storm-grey battleplate was decorated with twisting patterns, hammered runes, ropes of teeth, and the tips of wolf tails mounted in cast, angular brasses.

Bror took Loken aboard a crew train crammed with thralls. Many of them wore costumes as heavily decorated as those of their masters, and Loken guessed these were the higher ranking *kaerls* of the Chapter. The monorail accelerated mercilessly, turning the spinal way to a blur.

They reached the command spire soon after, and headed on towards the Wolf's Hall, Leman Russ' throneroom.

The long defensive corridor leading to the hall was lined solely with enormous sheets of ivory. The place was populated by the *Varagyr*, who other men called the Wolf Guard. These heavily decorated Space Wolves Veterans stood guard outside the hall, though Loken would have applied that term only loosely, because they did not stand at rigid attention, but congregated in clumps of two or three,

talking with each other in the uncouth Fenrisian tongue as loudly as revellers, seemingly inattentive to their task. Not even their livery had any consistency to it. The Legion badge of a red, snarling wolf upon the heraldry plate of the left pauldron was the only commonality. In other places of prominence Loken saw double-headed wolves, rearing wolves, howling wolves and all manner of wolves besides.

'My lord does not stand on ceremony,' whispered Bror, seeing the look on Loken's face 'We don't do parades.'

'I see,' said Loken.

'Better to be loyal and a little rough than polished drillmasters with treacherous hearts, eh?' Bror said.

His words came across as a direct challenge until Bror elbowed Loken and grinned. His elbow thudded off plasteel. Even though Loken wore his own armour, he was glad Bror wasn't wearing battleplate.

'These here are the Wolf Guard of the *Einherjar*, the jarl's inner circle. They are here to honour you. All this is for your benefit,' Bror raised a hand and grinned at a fellow of his. The warrior was dressed in his power armour without his helm, and had his face covered by a leather mask like Bror's. He nodded in response.

'I am honoured,' said Loken.

'You should be,' said Bror.

Loken was sincere. He *was* honoured. Once he would have dismissed the force as savages, regarding his own Legion as far superior. That was before the Luna Wolves had become the Sons of Horus, and the Sons of Horus had become traitors. Russ' wolves, the true wolves, had proved the more faithful.

They passed through the throng of warriors, having to beg pardon so they could go between them. There was no sense of discipline to them at all, but Loken knew this concealed a terrifying prowess in war.

Braziers gave off a suffocating heat. Firebowls burned animal oils that furred the ceiling with fatty deposits. At the far end of the corridor huge, circular ivory doors barred the way. A serpent ran around the outside, framing in its circle of scales a tempestuous sea crammed with monsters and foundering wooden ships. The serpent's mouth was clamped firmly around its own tail. Loken recognised the ouroboros, the ancient symbol of eternity, but he had never seen a representation like this before.

'Bror Tyrfingr!' roared a bearded giant. He wore a leather suit like Bror's and smelled like the cave of a hibernating bear. He grappled Bror, a half-wrestle, half-embrace that had the pair of them staggering about the corridor. Loken was forced to step back to avoid their boisterous greeting. The men grunted as they pushed at each other, before collapsing into laughter and hugging fiercely,

'Ah, brother Loken,' said Bror, his arm hung around the shoulders of the warrior. 'This is Varagyr Kettril Modinsson, called Dourface, of the retinue of Hvarl Red-Blade, the Jarl of Sepp.'

Kettril gave Loken a massive, infectious smile 'The lone wolf,' he said. He held out his arm. Loken took it only to be pulled into an embrace he would rather have avoided. He got a mouthful of musty pelt before Kettril released him.

'It is a privilege to meet you, brother, wolf to wolf,' said Kettril.

'I have no brotherhood, not anymore,' said Loken, a statement that caused Kettril to pull him close again.

'Never say that again,' Kettril whispered. 'We are all wolves of the Emperor here. If you find yourself lacking in a good warrior to watch your back,' he nodded his head towards Bror in jest, 'you can call on me. This I swear by the fires of the world forge.'

'I thank you,' said Loken, unsure of what to say.

'The Einherjar have gathered to the Wolf King,' said Kettril to Bror. 'Speak clearly and with pride,' he said to Loken. 'And leave nothing out.'

Kettril whistled shrilly between his teeth. The doors opened. Beneath the ivory padding were standard adamantium blast doors, thick and proud as those of any ship. This epitomised the Space Wolves, Loken thought. The deception of iron hidden under primitivism.

'Go on then,' said Kettril. 'Do not keep the Lord of Winter and War waiting.'

The hall beyond was huge, but the number of warriors and the way they clustered in its centre made it seem small and intimate The heights of the ceiling were lost in smoky darkness. A few lancet windows let in enough of Terra's earthshine to reveal the carved monsters lurking at the tops of pillars. Loken wished they had remained hidden. They reminded him of unclean things he had seen aboard the *Vengeful Spirit*.

Firebowls and resinous torches were the sole sources of light.

Tiny lumen indicators on power armour blinked in the dismal hall, shifting like sparks as their bearers moved. Tyrfingr pushed his way to the front through two score feral warriors. There were lords there aplenty, and other Legiones Astartes sporting primitive bone charms over their power armour who could only have been Leman Russ' famed priests. Many of the company wore the Routs strange leather masks. A couple had helms fashioned in the shape of wolf skulls. The masks danced in the flickering light, making the hall appear like an underworld populated by lost gods. Only a handful of the warriors were barefaced, but they looked as uncanny and fierce as the others.

Upon a throne of bones sat the Wolf King. Bror led Loken towards the primarch without ceremony. Men were coming and going from various smaller

doors in the sides of the hall, and the primarch paid no attention to his visitor until he was announced.

'My jarl!' Bror called, shoving past a black-armoured barbarian. 'I have him, I have brought you the last loyal Luna Wolf!'

Approaching the Wolf King was like striding towards a storm. The light changed. The air changed. Subtle pressures played upon little-used senses, those that warned of impending misfortune. They were the senses that told a woman her son was lost in battle, that alerted a child to the danger hiding in the dark. The world became a different place in the presence of Russ, less certain, more primal. Stepping close to him was to step back in time to man's distant past, when fire kept beasts from the cave, and every boulder had a name.

Russ broke off his conversation with his advisers and surged to his feet.

'*Fenrys hjolda*!' he shouted. 'Garviel Loken, back from the den of the arch traitor himself. You are not as dim as I thought if you survived that expedition!' His taunt was delivered with a smile. 'Come to me, loyal son of the Emperor.'

To have Russ turn his full attention on you was like attracting the personal enmity of a storm. Barely less imposing were the enormous wolves flanking his throne, one black, the other silver, Their majesty beggared belief; it was hard to imagine creatures such as they existing at all outside the mind of a dramaturge. The head of the smaller - and it was only ever so slightly smaller - would have reached Loken's shoulders if it stood. They stared at him through narrowed yellow eyes. The black curled its lips, showing fangs more like swords than teeth. Upon its head was a bald patch of knotted pink scar.

He dearly wished it would not stand.

Though the name of his beloved, dishonoured Legion evoked creatures like them, Loken did not like these wolves.

On the wall behind Russ was hung a large spear. A haft as thick as a comms array's sounding pole terminated in a sculpture of a snarling wolf. From the mouth protruded a sword-long, leaf-headed blade of shining gold. Fine knotwork crawled all over the plated plasteel. Slung under the wolfs body was the vented box of a disruption field generator, the power transmission cabling and field dispersal studs cunningly hidden by the decoration. There were subtler technologies woven into the blade besides. It was a psy weapon, a thing of the Lord of Mankind, come out of His forges and suffused with His mastery of science and the warp. Even inactive, it gave off a particular feel, a resonant echo of the Emperor's presence, that bred unease and filled the hearts of men with dark foreboding.

Leman Russ hated it. Somehow, Loken could tell that. Russ leaned away from where it hung. It was situated too far from his throne for him to seize to defend himself, whereas his other weapons, his giant-sized bolter and monstrous frost

blade, were close to hand. More than once the Wolf King glanced at it sidelong, as if he did not trust it to remain where if was Bror Tyrfingr knelt at the feet of his lord the sole true sign of deference Loken had witnessed thus far in his time upon the *Hrafnkel*. 'Get up, Bror,' boomed Russ, waving his hand widely. 'I won't have Loken here trotting back to the old man and describing my sons as grovelling wretches.' He grinned savagely at Loken. 'You will be reporting, won't you? That sly old hound has his eyes everywhere.'

'So do you, I think,' said Loken.

Russ smiled at Bror. 'We have nothing to hide in the Rout, eh, my sons? Tell Malcador what you like. Perhaps if you do he might stop bothering me with his questions.'

Shouts and mutters of agreement sounded from around the room. Loken estimated there to be a hundred or so warriors in the hall. Not only Russ' council of jarls and his priests, but the Legion's equivalents of Chaplains, Forge Marines and Apothecaries also. Without his helm display he could not be sure. He doubted he would have dared activate it even if he had his helmet on. The Wolves might have overreacted to the clumsy, unintended slight of a curious augur sounding.

'Someone get this man a seat!' said Russ. 'And some *mjod*!'

A chair was produced. Russ gestured that Loken should sit. A bronze drinking horn was passed into his hands. At Russ' urging Loken sipped the liquid. It burned his mouth, his throat and his stomach in succession with a flavour like engine oil mixed with acid. He stifled a cough. The drink would kill a mortal human.

'Good, yes?' said Bror. All the Space Wolves - the ones whose mouths he could see - were grinning at his discomfort.

'It is not to my taste, my lord primarch,' said Loken diplomatically.

'Ah, give it a few more sips,' said Russ. His accent was thicker than when Loken had last met him - the only time he had met him - in Malcador's Himalazian retreat. The primarch dropped back into his throne. He made a show of not caring what people thought of him, but it was a show. Malcador had told him that. 'It gets better the more you drink. It took the warriors of Fenris only a few years to develop a liquor that will intoxicate a legionary quickly, but we spent many years in perfecting it. Go on,' Russ raised his hand and waved it again. 'A big gulp this time. Mjod is not for sipping.'

Loken hid his misgivings and took a mouthful of the liquid. He suppressed a splutter. The burning was less pronounced this time. His adapted stomach clenched against the mjod, but he held it in, and after a moment a pleasant warmth spread through his belly.

'Good?' said Russ. His smile was all pointed teeth. They did not fit with the primarch's clean-shaven face. It was rarely commented on, but Russ was a

handsome being, though his features tended to the blunt and he had many scars. All the primarchs were made to be perfect, but some of them, Fulgrim and Sanguinius in particular, were more beautiful than others to begin with. Leman Russ was handsome in his way, if one looked past his furs and his manner. Loken wondered how many people ever did.

'Well then, you know why you are here,' said Russ. 'Let's get on with it.'

'You wish to hear of our mission.'

'I do. All of it. Start at the beginning.'

'From the beginning?'

'That's what I said, isn't it? See, Bjorn,' said Russ to a saturnine, dark-haired warrior stood at the left of his throne. 'I told you this one was slow.'

'Forgive me, my lord, have you not had Bror and the others tell you of what occurred?' asked Loken.

Russ rolled his head until his neck cracked. 'Ach, he has, he has! They have! I made them all start at the beginning, and I want to hear your version of events the same way. It's important. From hearing all accounts, the *skjalds*! he pointed out a mixed group of standard humans and legionaries stood at the side of the room, 'will fashion a telling of events that will be sung into the sagas of the Legion. An Adeptus Astartes legionary might remember better than a human, but he is still fallible. In collective remembrance, a truer account can be found.' Russ kicked his feet out and sprawled further into his throne. 'So go on, speak. Tell me of your adventure.'

So Loken spoke. He told of how he and Malcador's Knights Errant had infiltrated Horus' flagship, the *Vengeful Spirit*, at the height of the Battle of Molech. With a heavy heart he relayed the tally of the dead, how one by one noble heroes had been snatched from life, until finally they had been captured, and taken before Horus himself.

'Five of eleven of us died, my lord,' he said. 'Three of the others were mortally wounded. If it had not been for Banu Rassuah's actions, we would all have died, or worse.' He looked down, unable to hold the eye of the primarch. 'We were caught before we could map the *Vengeful Spirit* fully. I expressed my regret to Bror that we failed the task you set us.'

'We did not fail,' said Bror. 'I have said this to you. A lot.'

'And I have said a hundred times, my brother, that I cannot agree.' Loken held up his hands apologetically. His pauldrons shifted back on their mountings with a soft hiss. Only in the silence of Russ' hall, where the assembled lords of the Space Wolves listened so attentively, could such a quiet little sound be heard. 'I am sorry, but it is true. How can we call what we did a success?'

Russ breathed heavily, deep in thought. 'Success, no success. Bah. Tell me more of my brother. Tell me how powerful he seemed.'

Loken stumbled over his words. He could not quite believe what had become of the Warmaster, and his tongue rebelled when he tried to put it into words. 'He has changed, my lord. Completely. The primarch Horus Lupercal has become an abomination. Something has happened to him. I… I have never been in the presence of such power.' He paused after that statement, fearing it might appear that he held some loyalty for the Warmaster. Nothing could be further from the truth.

'Do you believe my brother has been overthrown by some malign intelligence?' asked Russ. 'I have heard reports that he has been corrupted, and that his thoughts are not his own.' Was there hope in Russ' voice? That Horus the Great the Emperor's finest son, was not to blame for what was happening?

Malcador had confided in Loken two things of import about the Wolf King. The first was that his barbarian king persona could be raised and lowered as easily as a visor; he was not the simple warrior lord he portrayed. The second was that he regretted what had happened on Prospero, and was stung at how he had been manipulated into it. It would be easier for him to accept that it was not his brother that had used him, but some other, eldritch thing. Russ might hope, Malcador said, that Horus could be saved, not only for Russ' love for his brother, but for his own vindication.

Maybe it was both, maybe it was neither. Loken tried to read the true intentions of the Wolf King, employing tricks of observation Malcador's agents had taught him, but he could not. He saw only a savage's face, with a hierophant's inscrutable gaze.

Loken quelled his frustration. He was destined to always be a blind weapon. It was not his place to judge a primarch.

'Regrettably, no,' said Loken, answering Russ' question. 'Whatever he has become, the Warmaster's mind still rules his body. Lupercal's ambition drives him on. When he spoke with me, it was Horus who tried to sway me to his side again and not some Neverborn abomination, though the *Vengeful Spirit* hosts such things now. It was Horus who killed the Half-Heard, as if he were nothing.' He looked into Russ' piercing blue eyes, and was struck again by the intelligence he saw there. 'We have seen so many things we thought could not be true. Daemons, creatures of the warp infesting human flesh, gods perhaps, toying with the lives of men. But Horus lives. He was corrupted upon Davin by that blade, but I knew him when I saw him again. He could not have become this way were it not for his failings. Pride. Hubris. I thought primarchs beyond reproach, but I have learned that none of you are perfect. If Horus is a cat's paw, he is more a willing one than not.' Russ shifted uneasily at Loken's words, like a wolf sensing something dangerous on the breeze. He could not deny the truths the Luna Wolf spoke, but

even after all this, thought Loken, he still believes in the Emperor's infallible sons.

The Wolf King burst out laughing. 'Again you surprise me. You are a bold one, Garviel Loken, in being so honest. Now, the most important thing you must tell me.' Russ leaned forwards in his throne, his eyes narrowed. 'Can I kill him? Can I kill the Warmaster?' Before Loken could answer, Russ went on. 'In the old days, in the Crusade I thought I could beat most of my brothers. Maybe not Sanguinius. In him there is a fine blend of skill and fury. He is a *baresark* in angel's garb. Or the Night Haunter, for he has the heedless power of the insane. But the others… Angron? He's too angry. Fulgrim?' He shrugged. 'Too proud. Perturabo and Dorn are too stolid. Guilliman is too stern to enjoy battle and so I would beat him too. Lorgar I could spit on and that would drop him into the dirt, he's so weak from all that kneeling. Alpharius is a wretched serpent. And we all know what happened to the great sorcerer of Prospero. The rest I could defeat as easily as this.' He snapped his fingers.

'Horus though,' he grimaced. 'Put to it, one on one, I could have beaten him. It would have been hard, and close fought, and had fortune favoured him over me, he would have triumphed. But the feat was within my grasp. So tell me, Garviel Loken, is it now? Can I still kill him?'

Loken's face tightened. Russ was proud, they said. He looked from the corners of his eyes at the wolf lords around him. Proud barbarians with an over-developed sense of honour were easy to insult. But they also said Russ was no fool.

Loken made his choice. 'No,' he said. 'You cannot beat him. Not like he is now. I do not think anyone can, save perhaps the Emperor Himself.'

The Wolf King's lips curved in thought and his eyes unfocused. He stroked idly at the pelt affixed to his shoulder. The bluff expression fell away and for a moment Loken was witness to the man the Wolf King hid.

An instant later, the thoughtful man was gone, replaced by the smiling savage.

'I thank you, Garviel Loken, for your honest counsel, but I assure you I will beat the Warmaster. I am going to have to.'

The audience was over. Russ stood. His wolves yawned, one after the other, the second wider than the first as they competed to see who could gape furthest.

'Tell Malcador I shall be borrowing Bror here for a while. Don't worry, I'll bring him back, so long as his thread remains uncut,' said Russ.

'Yes, my lord. I shall report to the regent, then return. When do we leave?'

Russ frowned. 'When do *we* leave? *We* do not leave, Garviel Loken.' Russ pointed a grubby finger at him. '*You* are staying here.'

'My lord, I beg of you,' said Loken. He had a consuming desire to confront his father again. He wished to face him one more time, with no doubt in his heart.

'Let me come. I have sworn an oath to defy the Warmaster to my dying breath. I want to be a part of this.'

Leman of the Russ shook his head. His copper-blond topknot swayed in the ship's foul air.

'Not you, you remain!' he said sternly. Then he added softly, 'I say to you from one wolf to another, this is not your fight. It is unwise to intrude into the feuds of brothers, as we say on Fenris. They are the bloodiest of all.'

Once more Russ' smile dropped. 'Do not be sad. You will have plentiful opportunity to face your gene-father,' he said. 'If you are right, and I cannot beat him, he will kill me then he will be coming here. Fight him then.'

TWO

Runemarked

Loken was shown out by Bror. Without needing to be told, the lower-ranking Space Wolves and their mortal servants began to depart, leaving Russ alone with the Einherjar. Outside of this august group only Bror Tyrfingr and Bjorn the One-Handed remained. Bror's inclusion was understandable to the Einherjar. He had been on Horus' ship. He served Malcador, the Emperor's right hand.

Bjorn was another matter. Russ knew it was a mystery to his Wolf Lords why Bjorn was so often at his side. Russ wasn't entirely sure himself. At Alaxxes the runes had hinted at some important role for the one-armed warrior. The runes did not lie, and so Russ kept Bjorn around.

Russ had brought his entire Legion to punish Magnus. With few exceptions they had remained as one force ever since Prospero's burning. Therefore they were all there, the Wolf Lords who had survived. There was Ogvai Ogvai Helmschrot, Jarl of Tra, Lufven Close-Handed of For, Amlodhi Skarssen Skarssensson of Fyf, Skunnr of Sesc, Hvarl Red-Blade, Lord of Sepp, Baldr Vidunsson of For-Twa, Sturgard Joriksson of Tra-Tra, Laughing Jaurtnag of Tolv, recently returned to the Legion from the Watch Pack sent to Dorn, and Scarred Oki who had taken up the burden of Tolvs command while Jaurmag was absent. Russ still had not decided what to do with Jaurmag and Oki. Jaurmag had defied him; but was a better leader than Oki. There was a problematic decision there It could wait Lastly there was Jorin Bloodhowl, who led Dekk-Tra.

The rest, the Great Companies of Onn, Twa, Dekk and Elva, had no leaders. Holmi Longganger of Twa had been killed at Prospero. Vili of Elva slain at Daverant. Elva, Russ reflected, had been struck by a fell-wyrd, running through four Wolf Lords in as many years. Dekk's lord Hemtal was dead at Alaxxes, along with Russ' greatest loss, Gunnar Gunnhilt, Jarl of Onn.

Russ and Lord Gunn had not seen eye to eye at the end. Russ resented him for his insubordination still, but Gunn's death had been a good one. They could settle their differences in the Golden Halls of the Oververse when Russ' own time came. If the Golden Halls was where Russ would go.

The clash between the two sides of Russ was at its most tempestuous when it came to religious belief. He preferred not to dwell on those questions. When he

spoke with his priests, he believed the old tales. When he spoke with his father, he believed the Imperial Truth. That was sufficient for living in the now.

He had lost several of his lords, and the state of the Legion at large was even worse than that suggested. The perils of gathering your *hersirs* together, thought Russ ruefully, is that they can all fall through the ice at once. Prospero had thinned their ranks. Alaxxes had come close to catastrophe. Vanaheim and Daverant had culled more. The VI had thrown itself into Terra's defence and the forays beyond with all its characteristic energy, but they were weaker than they had been for years.

With the jarls were the higher Wolf Priests and other ranking Vlka Fenryka. Two dozen or so all told, hard-bitten warlords. Their warsuits, the pinnacle of the Imperial armourers' art, its existence possible solely through the most refined of human technologies, were draped with a barbarian king's wealth in gold, trophies, runes and furs. They were a contradiction in grey. Russ liked them that way.

The last of the lesser warriors and kaerls left. The armoured doors rolled shut. Firebowls guttered in the changing air currents. Atmosphere processors whined as they consumed the smoke.

'My warriors, my Rout,' said Russ fondly. 'My Einherjar. The finest warriors in all the Emperor's domains.'

He looked them over. The Vlka Fenryka were never truly still. There was an urge to action in them that nothing could quiet. Their wargear and personal effects were so different they could not be called a uniform. His command cadre was a coalition of kings. They were not a Legion in the same way that any of the others were. This too pleased Russ.

'Heed what I am about to say,' Russ said. 'I do not wish to repeat myself, and I do not wish my words to be repeated outside of this hall. I will work the murder-make on any who whisper what I will tell to you.'

His lords shifted and hunched, alpha pack leaders challenged by a wolf larger than they. They could submit, they could run, they could fight. Russ did not threaten warriors like them without good reason. He felt their unease.

'The Luna Wolf Garviel Loken spoke the truth. I cannot beat Horus Lupercal. If we attack now, he will kill me, and this Legion will die.'

Russ did not expect his men to react favourably to this statement, and they did not. Their alarm was mixed with anger. It pulsed from them and through the Wolf King. He felt an echo of their disquiet emanate from the spear on the wall behind him, as if it had gathered up all the bad thoughts in the room and turned them spitefully back upon the gathering. Russ did not like the spear. He did not like spears as a weapon in general. He preferred the nobility of swords. They were hard to make and hard to fight with well. In their laboriously forged edges and the skill required to use them was the legacy of kings. After swords, Russ favoured

axes. The axe's smile was a warriors battle joy made manifest. Axes needed strength and cunning. They were heavy and slow. Timing with an axe was all. When handled poorly they were a death sentence for the wielder. When landed correctly they had power no other edged weapon did, breaking armour, carving flesh and smashing bones. They were a murder tool, uncompromising in their brutality. They were joyous, they were honest.

Spears were cunning. Spears did not smile like an axe, nor did they possess a sword's majesty. A spear was a darting tongue, wounding like a hag's unkind words. The spear was the mocker in the court, the long reach of shame. A spear put a man at too far a remove from his foe. You could not taste a man's fear sweat when wielding a spear. You could not look him dead in the eye. Might as well use a gun as a spear.

But that was not why Russ did not like his father's gift.

'What are you saying?' said Ogvai. He snarled the words. They vexed him, and he bit at them as they came from his mouth.

'You heard what I said. Horus will not fall to my sword,' said Russ. 'Then we are not to go?' said Scarred Oki.

'Unstopper your ears, Oki!' said Russ. 'I said I could not beat him if we left now. But, my jarls,' he said, standing, 'I shall find a way. We have a purpose to fulfil, and we shall do what we were made for. Horus will fall. Kva!'

Russ called for his chief Rune Priest, Kva, also called He-Who-is-Divided. He walked haltingly, even with the support of his power armour. The Allfather's remoulding of his flesh had stayed the progress of a disease that had plagued him since birth, but it could not reverse it. Beneath his battleplate his body was knotted and gnarled as the rigging on a storm-wrecked ship. Men outside the Legion thought his war-name came from his deformation. That was not so. Kva's spirit was so strong it more than compensated for his enfeebled body. It was said of him that he was more powerful in the Underverse than he was in the Sea of Storms that is this world.

On the face of it such a person was not fit to be a legionary but then, such a person was not fit to survive childhood on Fenris. That he had done both was enough to validate him, never mind his wisdom or his wyrding skill. His disability was invisible to his brothers.

The Varagyr stepped back to give Kva room. The more superstitious among them spat upon the floor. They meant no disrespect to the priest, but the wights crawled close below the surface of the world where warlocks like Kva went.

'Horus' transformation is no surprise to we *gothi*,' said Kva, addressing the room. 'His altered soul quivers the Underverse. The stench of his corruption is carried on the winds of a thousand worlds. His name is howled in anguish by

every wolf in Asaheim. He is a monster, but all here know that no monster is unbeatable.'

'We are to return to Fenris,' said Russ. 'There I will take counsel with Kva and the other gothi. At home, the priests will be protected by the spirit of our world. There we can learn his weakness.'

'You cannot do this here?' asked Hvarl. 'We are at the birth world. The Emperor is the greatest warlock of them all. He will shield you.' There was nothing traitorous in what Hvarl said. He named the Emperor honestly. Men of the Fenryka spoke without falsehood.

'The Allfather is of Terra, we are of Fenris. Perilous things may be done there,' said Kva. 'Things that cannot be attempted elsewhere, even here. We are of the ice and of the fire. Fenris' world howl will drive back the wights and the ghosts and the Neverborn. There we need not wait upon the Allfather's indulgence.'

'What do you hope to find?' asked Huscarl Grimnr Blackblood, chief of Russ' personal guard. 'I do not know,' said Kva. 'A man's wyrd cannot be changed, but if it appears without hope, that does not mean it is so. I was born with this disease already rooted in my bones. My right arm was reed-thin - a sure sign of a poor wyrd. So sure were the elders of my tribe that I could not survive they declined to present me with the child gift. My father insisted that his son at least be given the chance, urged on by the tears of my mother. And lo! I grasped the axe in my strong left hand.' He shook his staff. The runes dangling from the wolf's skull atop it jangled. 'And I would not let it go. They said I would not live, but I did. They said I would not prosper, but I did. When the Sky Warriors came to our aett and took me, they said I would fail their trials, and I did not. They said I would fail the flesh-making, and I did not. Nor did I fail Morkai's test. Here I am. There is often a way, when all hope seems lost. I am living proof.

'Fine,' grunted Amlodhi Skarssen Skarssensson. 'I'll go wherever the primarch says, to Hel and back if need be. I'm not dissuaded by a small thing like death. You want to gather battle-cunning in the Underverse, it makes no odds to my thread. It'll be cut when it's cut. Tell me first though, two-sided man, where is the Warmaster? We can't kill him if we can't find him.'

Words of agreement rose up in the group, making it seem three times their number were in the hall.

Kva looked to Russ. The primarch inclined his head in permission. Kva reached into a tasselled hide pouch at his side, and tossed a handful of fragile bark squares into the air.

They fell partway to the floor before coming to a gentle stop, and rose up. On every one was carved a single rune. Behind Kva's leather mask, his golden yellow eyes closed, and a sense of power bellied out from him, like wind filling the sail of a wolf ship.

The Einherjar spat upon the floor again.

'Bror and Malcador's champions marked the *Vengeful Spirit* for attack. They carved the *futharc* into its ways. These signs will guide our boarding parties, but they do more than that. Through these marks, I and the other gothi can find the Warmaster's ship within the Sea of Souls.'

'What if the Warmaster's devils have found the marks?' asked Ogvai Ogvai Helmschrot. 'We could be walking into a trap.'

'They won't,' said Bror. 'We were careful.'

'He has many witches,' said Hvarl.

'The power they contain is alien to the Warmaster's servants,' said Kva. 'They will not sense it.'

'If he finds some, he won't find all,' said Bror. 'And he'll think they are only what they look to be, scouting marks for important locations aboard his ship, because that's what they are, but they also aren't.'

'Attacking him is too risky,' said Skunnr. 'Horus is too battle-canny. We can't attack the traitor head on, we are too few. What do your brothers say?'

'You're too timid, Skunnr!' shouted Lufven. 'There's glory here.'

'Timid? It is you who are unwise!'

Shouts rose.

'Of course it's risky,' said Russ, interrupting the brewing argument. 'Of course he'll see through everything we do. We go against the arch traitor, the Warmaster, the greatest general in human history. This is no land-raid. Compared to this our greatest campaigns will be as nothing. The Wheel of Fire? Nothing. The Rangan Xenocides? A day's friendly brawling.' His warriors bristled at his words. There was a bitter undertone they were not used to hearing in their lord's voice. 'This battle will define us. This will make us. By this deed will our Legion be forever remembered,' said Russ. 'I want Horus to guess what we are doing. I want him to expect us. A good hunter uses the land against his prey. He makes his prey confident in its might I want him to think us foolish, to charge back. In this way can mere men bring down an algr, the Great Razor Elk. This is how we will beat Horus. He is arrogant that is our greatest weapon.'

'I laud your courage, great jarl,' said Skarssensson. 'But first you have to find a way to kill him, or the cleverest trap will do nought.'

'As always, Amlodhi, you have a fine grasp of the strategic detail,' said Russ with a grin.

'Just so long as I know,' said Skarssensson.

'You shall know as soon as I do,' said Russ. 'My jarls, we return to Fenris soon! Prepare yourselves. Prepare your Great Companies. Rejoice that you shall see home again, but be mindful that we shall be there but a while, for once the truth is revealed to me, we strike for Horus without delay. Fenrys hjolda!' he proclaimed.

'Fenrys hjolda!' they replied.

THREE

Question Not, Learn Not

Among the multitudes of the Mechanicum's cults were many who despised the human form. Whether they were a modest proportion of an outpost's small crew, or the entire populace of metal-clad forge worlds, or if they openly expounded their loathing of flesh or hid it, they were legion. Their opponents argued that a biological machine honed by millions of years of evolution was difficult to better. The tinkerers, cyber-surgeons and gene-hackers paid them no heed.

In sustenance hall 46 in the Septa station of the Heptaligon, the chief facility of the Trisolian System, two natives of Mars were debating the relative merits of the pro and anti *forma naturalis* positions. It was the week the Warmaster came, though at the time of their conversation that was several days away.

The interlocutors were low-ranking tech adepts, elevated from the mass of the Mechanicum's slice of servile humanity, but not far along in their careers. They were natives of Mars and of a similar age, having taken installation of their intelligence cores only a couple of decades before, though they did not know each other then. Upon posting to the Trisolian System, their paths had crossed Finding common ground - a few old haunts they both knew a smattering of shared colleagues - they had struck up a fragile friendship.

Their names were Friedisch Adum Silip Qvo, and Belisarius Cawl. They did not agree on much, it was true, but it was equally true that they enjoyed the friction of their differences as much as the ease of their similarities.

When their shifts coincided they would take sustenance together. They often lingered in the hall for a while to debate with one another, as they did that day. Surrounded by the clatter of nutrient cubes delivered to metal trays and the constant hum of plasma cell recharging coils, their often contentious discussions were as safely held there as anywhere else.

A good thing too, for their debate had taken them into dangerous territory. The subject the racket of the hall shrouded was their shared mistress, Domina Magos Hester Aspertia Sigma-Sigma. The line of conversation worried Friedisch. For the same reasons, it energised Cawl.

Somewhere inside Domina Magos Hester Aspertia Sigma-Sigma was a woman, though most people would not see that, because what covered the woman over was so alien as to obscure her human origins completely.

'Consider her appearance,' said Cawl, before unflatteringly describing her. 'Domina Hester Aspertia Sigma-Sigma is exactly three metres tall when she is at full extension. The body she wears, for the benefit of the world, is a monstrous thing, as long again behind her reverse jointed pelvis as it is tall above the clutch of mechapeds that propel it. Her mirrored helm face covers over the front of a cranial augmetic three times the volume of a standard human head and twelve times the weight. From her occiput sprouts a circular crest of data arrays, short-range emitters, omnilinks, sensor banks, augurs, vox-parsers, cogitator shunts and other common tea* tions devices that are as complex as any voidship's sensor suite. In deference to her wilfully forgotten origins, her mirrored face b fashioned like a eamivale mask - that of a well-proportioned human female whose beauty is so well considered in its artifice it is bland The eyes and the lips are sealed. A hint of sardonic humour has been stamped onto the mouth.'

'You shouldn't be speaking this way,' interrupted Fnedisch.

'Why not?' said Cawl. 'It is true. She would admit it. That silver mask is as human as the domina gets. She is the epitome of the cyberphile cult. There is no remnant of humanity beyond this ironic statement. If there are fleshly components to her, they are sealed deep within her armoured warframe and never displayed.'

'But she is human.'

'Have you ever seen her organic parts?'

'Well, no…'

'*Well*, then,' said Cawl.

'She's still human,' insisted Fnedisch.

Cawl shook his cowled head. 'She has a multiplicity of arms. Seven, at my last count but the number never remains the same for very long. The domina is addicted to change in a way that some say praises the Omnissiah, but which I privately hold to be very unhealthy.' He stirred his caffeine drink. It smelled more of oil than it did of anything else. 'She cannot be called human, not anymore. Any semblance to normal human anatomy is gone. Save that silver face,' said Cawl gleefully, 'which is appended to that body like the punchline to a jest of questionable taste.'

Which is exactly what Cawl had just made. Fnedisch was appalled. 'You can't say that!' said Friedisch. 'You absolutely cannot say that.' He spoke quickly. They were both lowly men, and Friedisch could not yet afford the binaric augminer unit he coveted. Denied its lightning-fast mode of conversation he had sped his organic speech to compensate. It was an affectation that, frankly, irritated Cawl, though he was generous enough to hide it.

So Cawl thought. Friedisch was perfectly aware of Cawl's irritation, and was irritated in return.

On the surface, Cawl appeared unaugmented. He was one of those who regarded the human form as holy in itself as an expression of the Machine-God's perfection. Friedisch was of the other school seeing the body as a natural accident that must be improved upon. Not that his own augmentations had gone to plan. Friedisch's ocular enhancement had not bonded correctly with his organic corpus. His skin was a sickly white around the plastek-coated steel, spongy looking with persistent infection. A scent of biocidal gels clung to him as a result of unsuccessful self-treatment.

'How can anyone proclaim their adherence to the Mechanicum code when they swap out components so freely?' Cawl said. 'There is a perfect point that can be reached, but that is the intersection between compromise and ambition.'

Friedisch put his tin mug of sustenance solution down. 'That's not perfection,' he said. 'That is settling.'

'It is a kind of perfection,' insisted Cawl. 'In admitting our imperfections, we move as close to perfection as we can get. Imperfections must be embraced and accommodated. They cannot be ironed away.'

Friedisch's frown grew a few more wrinkles. They pulled at the puffy skin around his augmetics. Cawl couldn't help looking at them. Friedisch had taken the upgrade too soon, before he had sufficient monies or influence to ensure good-quality finings.

'That's… heretical,' said Friedisch.

'Piffle!' said Cawl. 'Human rivalry cannot be programmed out. We in the Mechanicum are human. Human knowledge, human power. If we abandon human form, we abandon the Machine-God. How often do we forget that?'

Friedisch disagreed with Cawl; he was worried what would happen to him if he were caught spouting such nonsense, and by extension what would happen to Friedisch himself.

'You skirt dangerous ground,' said Friedisch. 'The central tenet of our creed is improvement of the human form through embracement of technology.'

'Yes!' said Cawl in agreement, though in actual fact he was not agreeing; it was a rhetorical trick he over-employed. 'And look at what the Emperor achieved doing just that. In the Legiones Astartes, primarchs, custodians and the others He has accentuated nature's art. What He has done is sublime, but the form remains. Surely the Machine-God must be pleased with these finest works of the Omnissiah?'

'If you believe Him to be the Omnissiah.'

'"Thou shalt know Him by his works',' quoted Cawl from the *Principia Mechanicum*. 'If you can't accept the Emperor as the messenger of the Machine-God, you will be waiting for your Omnissiah for a very long time,' said Cawl.

'There is too much dissension as to whether He is the Machine-God, or the Omnissiah, or neither,' said Friedisch. 'I'll leave the logic gate on either-or for that one.'

'I have made up my mind, and I am entitled to my own views.'

'Whatever He is,' said Friedisch. 'The transhumans. He has made are a means to an end, you'll see.'

'Do you really think so?'

Friedisch nodded earnestly. 'Above all things, the Emperor wishes to preserve humanity, not advance it into new forms. They are tools to be used to protect the baseline types. They are all sterile.'

'Not so,' said Cawl. 'They merely reproduce in a more efficient way.'

'A parasite's way. The engineered gene-code of the Legions requires a host. They cannot reproduce alone, but must be nurse-maided.'

'Then you do not see them as the refinement of the human genome?'

'They are not. If that were the case, why is the Council of Terra made up of baseline humans? If the Emperor is the Machine-God—'

'Or his Omnissiah,' said Cawl. He couldn't resist interrupting everything Friedisch said.

'Or his Omnissiah, why doesn't He embrace the machine as we do?' Friedisch leaned closer in. 'The storm is dying. Messages have started to come through from Terra. The Mechanicum has been disbanded. There is a new Fabricator General, on Earth, not on Mars. They are calling this new organisation the Adeptus Mechanicus. It is a coup by any other name that brings our people further into Terra's thrall.'

'And? Kelbor-Hal is a traitor. There should be consequences to his actions,' said Cawl with a shrug.

'He is the rightfully chosen emissary of the Machine-God, not the Emperor!' hissed Friedisch. 'He has done wrong, fine. Let him be tried by his peers and executed if that is judged appropriate. But no one outside the Martian hierarchy has the right to replace him.'

'The Omnissiah does.'

'If the Emperor is the Omnissiah.'

'If He is,' allowed Cawl.

'Which He is not,' said Friedisch.

There followed a brief, tense silence. Nearby energisers crackled. Sanctified oil dispensers chimed. A trio of higher-ranking adepts scuttled by, twittering at each other in binaric.

'Let us return to the debate in question,' Cawl said.

Friedisch wearily acquiesced.

'So, your standpoint is that the Emperor does not believe in improving the human race in toto. The creatures He has made are for a purpose, and are disposable.'

'It's obvious, Cawl!'

Cawl held up a silencing finger. 'Whereas I hold that we instead are over-reliant on the supplementation of the human body with these crude augmetics.' He gestured pointedly at Friedisch's own mistake. 'If you are correct, I can't say who has the better goal. Can you honestly say your additions have improved your life?'

'Well, I…' The question wrong-footed Friedisch. 'The implants *were* problematic. There is the low-band spectral sight. And the dark sight. I can see in the dark very well. The pict function carries data-rich imagery directly to my memcore without requiring it to pass along my optic nerve shunts, which frees up more bandwidth of my native neurology for—'

'But has it really brought you anything?' interrupted Cawl. Again. 'Apart from a succession of fungal infections?' He smiled, a quick, nervous, wholly condescending flash of white teeth, and gestured with his cup at Friedisch's inflamed skin.

Friedisch sighed. Cawl's lack of conversational etiquette was maddening. Once he began talking, it was exceptionally difficult to break into the datastream until he had delivered whatever point he had to make, often several times over.

'No,' he said. 'But it will. This augmetic is just the start.'

'Exactly,' said Cawl, agreeing without agreeing. Again. 'Now, let us suppose that the domina felt the same way about her first implants and still feels the same way? Why do you think she upgrades herself constantly? What has she gained? Nothing!' he said, answering his own question.

'Well, nothing except a five hundred-year lifespan, the ability to control a battlefleet by thought alone and more cogitative power than there is in every thinking unit in the system. Not much utility at all,' Friedisch said sarcastically. 'She controls all the military assets of Trisolian. I would not say that is *nothing*.'

Cawl ignored his jibe, leaving Friedisch put out.

'Let us not even touch on what she has under those robes,' Cawl said.

They shared a little shudder. 'Well, my friend,' said Cawl. 'Mark my words, you will never find me altering myself to such an extent. I am human. I know what I am. There are far more efficient ways of increasing ones lifespan, powers of thought and the other innumerable facilities the Machine God has seen fit to gift us without mutilating the original body beyond recognition.'

'You are a heretek, Cawl. Biogenesis is not the Machine-Gods doing.'

'I believe it is. And if it isn't, so what? All this metal is counterproductive. Inefficient. If I am to be enhanced, let it be by the science of the pure biologians,

not the genetor-mechanii. You'll never catch me becoming like the domina.'

Friedisch was flustered by Cawl's standpoint. 'The human body is inefficient. Melding with the machine is the best way forward.'

'I say improving on the marvels nature has provided is. Machinery is the inefficient part, and once bonded, it is far from freeing - it is limiting. The battleplate of the Legions is a better solution. Put it on when needed, take it off when done. Replace according to role and function.'

'You're obsessed with the damned Legions!' Friedisch attempted a laugh to cover his annoyance. It came out forced.

'My dear fellow, we're adepts of the Mechanicum. Mechanicus. Whatever. My point is we're all obsessed with something. Oh, are you finished?'

Friedisch nodded, his mouth full of his meal's last morsel. They returned their plates and cups to the fabricators, where every fragment of organic matter down to the last bacterium would be removed to be recycled into fresh nutrient cubes. The plates would be melted down and reformed. The station had plenty of energy, and precious little water. Refabrication was more efficient than washing the dishes.

'Tez-Lar!' said Cawl.

A bulky servitor detached itself from a charging socket and clanged heavily towards the tech-priests.

'You shouldn't give them names,' said Friedisch, though he viewed Cawl's servitor enviously. He had not accrued sufficient status or credit to afford his own.

'Why not?' said Cawl. 'You should have a little more spirit a little more individuality.'

'It's just not done!' said Friedisch. 'I wish you would think about your future sometimes. How does it look? Follow the maxim, question not, learn not. It's a warning.'

'That's not a warning not to question, it's a warning that if we don't question, we don't learn!' said Cawl.

'But only in a certain manner, Cawl.'

'Are you talking down to me, Friedisch?'

Not like you ever do that to me, thought Friedisch. 'Both meanings are meant,' he said. 'You can't see that, and it will get you into trouble.'

'Ah, my friend. One day you will have the emotional excision and you will no longer care what happens to me, though I am touched. Who needs hierarchy, that's what I say.' He leaned in to Friedisch and lifted his hand to hide a stage whisper. 'Hierarchy gets in the way of getting things done,' he said. 'You chase status all you like. Leave the great deeds to me!'

Arrogant fool, thought Friedisch of Cawl.

Mind-numbing energy parasite, thought Cawl of Friedisch.

'Anyway,' Cawl said, 'Tez-Lar likes his name, don't you, Tez-Lar?'

'Yes, master,' groaned the cyborg. The voice came through an augmitter set into his left shoulder. Tez-Lar had no lower jaw.

'He's named after the fabled master of the Motive Force, the great Srpskan-Murican,' explained Cawl condescendingly.

Friedisch gritted his teeth. Cawl had told him that only a dozen times before.

'He was a polymath.' Cawl patted his hulking servitor unit on its mulcted shoulder. 'Tez-Lar's name is a sign of my respect for those who master more than one field. It is a sign of my ambition to do the same.'

'There is nothing wrong with ambition,' said Friedisch 'But missaplied ambition will get you killed - that is what the maxim warns against.'

'My dear Friedisch, in this terrible era everything will get you killed. My ambition distracts me from how awful life is. You should try it.'

Friedisch was ambitious! He had a stinging retort ready to deploy. It never arrived.

'I shall see you for last watch sustenance?' Cawl said.

'Yes,' said Friedisch, meaning to say no. He never did: despite himself, he enjoyed Cawl's company.

'As the Machine-God wills it,' said Cawl, and off he went.

Cawl's workspace-quarters were as modest as his rank, located far down the levels of Septa, near where its vast trunk anchored the station to its host moon. Tech-adept accommodation was a warren of intersecting corridors laid out by machine-governed algorithms, but confusing to the unenhanced human mind. Narrow doors gave way into small rooms. In each one, and thus also in Cawl's, there was a single atmospheric vent, for those that needed air. A rotatable bed had a workbench on the underside, a tool locker nestled close to its head. Cawl's room was further cramped by Tez-Lar's revitalisation cradle. Cawl was tall, like a lot of Martians. The natives of the red planet had delicate bones lengthened over millennia of living under low gravity. But the beds of the processing station were made to fit a physiological average taken over hundreds of forge worlds, so it was too short for him. When he worked at his little bench on his folding stool he banged his left elbow on Tez-Lar's cradle. The Mechanicum prided itself on being the guardian of knowledge, but at the macro scale it was susceptible to the idiocy of brute generality. It was all so damnably inefficient. Cawl preferred to work around all that.

Friedisch was envious of Tez-Lar for all the wrong reasons. Cawl hadn't told him that he'd built the servitor himself from scavenged parts. Like the cradle he rested in. Like many of the idiosyncratic tools that cluttered his work desk. They were mainly of Cawl's own building. He had purchased none of them, been

awarded but a few, and acquired most of the parts for the rest in dubious circumstances.

Fundamentally, the Mechanicum operated upon the principle of discovery - or finders keepers, to put it more crudely. Cawl put his acquisitiveness down to an individual expression of the principle that guided all forge world societies, and doggedly refused to acknowledge his acquisitions as theft.

Technically, Cawl shouldn't have filched the bionics for Tez-Lar from the recyc heaps of Gamma-Gamma-Gamma when he was stationed there. Technically, to lay claim to the corpse of the indigent who provided Tez-Lar's organic component, he should have filled in rather a lot of forms.

Finders keepers. They could call it stealing if they wanted to. He knew better.

He didn't have time for any social conventions like custom or law. They were so restrictive. The pursuit of knowledge was a pure calling that overrode any moral compass, not that the priesthood was in any way moral.

He sincerely believed what he had said to Friedisch. Too many of his colleagues were focused on their own advancement. Advancement in position was a corollary to advancement of human knowledge; to put it the other way round was counterproductive to the consolidated effort of the Mechanicum.

So often, individual human desires undermined collective human effort. Cawl could easily progress to a higher level with the priesthood. Doing that meant taking a specialisation, pledging allegiance to one of the Mechanicum's myriad factions and all the limitations those things brought. At higher levels, his work would be more heavily monitored. At some point he would have to rise through the ranks. But not yet. He had so much to learn. For the time being he chose to operate under the auspex beam, as it were.

Trisolian was a major transit hub for the Mechanicum. Aboard the Heptaligon there were biologians, astromancers, genetors, artisans, magi, logi, transmechanics, lexmechanics, cyberians, cogitati… Tech-priests of every conceivable type. Cawl had spent the last few years going to each kind that interested him. He flattered his way into their confidence, learning all he could of their knowledge before proclaiming, with great regret, that his talents were not fit for their specialisation, and that he must humbly take his leave.

Then he would move on to the next, and begin his learning anew.

Cawl was smart enough to know this had been noticed. Some tech-priests took their time in choosing a cult to follow, so such behaviour was not out of the ordinary. Unless, of course, it had been going on for years. Cawl fit into the latter category. For the time being, it did not matter he had been detected. A certain capability for schemes was a requirement for a talented adept. Besides, the data logging his movement tended to get lost when he went on to his next posting. He had nothing to do with that. Organisational inefficiency was to blame. The data

would exist forever, but sanction would only fall on him at the Heptaligon if someone went looking for it, and were successful in finding it.

He had pressing problems to solve before he must embrace the Mechanicum's abstruse power games.

All the data he accumulated required storage. If knowledge gave the man the power of a king, storage was his kingdom. Cawl wanted to be a powerful king, therefore, he required a large kingdom.

It was for that reason that Cawl had his intelligence core out of the socket in his head, and in pieces on the table in front of him.

He had the device divided neatly into two. Cogitation unit on the left, memcore processor on the right Delicate mechadendrites flicked out of burrows on Cawl's wrist manipulating tiny components he amid not trust his fingers with.

The main feature of his desk was the massive magnification unit mounted on an armature clamped to the side. Status screed ticked up the display integrated with the glass. In the centre a complex arrangement of diagrammatical graphics guided his actions.

Without mental aid, indeed, with a headache owing to his removal of his enhancements, Cawl undertook work so complex no higher adept would dream of entrusting him with it. At risk was the precise recollection machines afforded a man. One slip could obliterate years of hard-won skill.

Sometimes he thought it would be better to have two brains rather than keep doing this.

The hole in his head was cold. The aseptic gels that filled it and kept it free of disease chilled his brain with evaporation. He did not dare cover his head over. His hood might dislodge the sterile plastek patch closing the opening. Really, *really* this kind of operation should only be undertaken in one of the genetors' surgical theatres.

Cawl enjoyed a challenge.

He smiled at his own audacity. Only slightly; the smallest of movements could disturb his delicate work.

Before mid-watch bell, Cawl had performed fourteen illegal procedures on his own mind. When mid-watch plus one bell sounded, signifying the start of his shift, he was rebuilding the augment.

He glanced at his chronograph as the last panel clicked into place and his mechanical tendrils whipped back into the holes in his wrists.

Cawl lifted his hands and shook them out before gingerly picking up his intelligence core. It was important they be steady. It always surprised Cawl how heavy the intelligence core was. He thrust the hand holding the core up to the wrist into a pot of biocide he kept on his desk, leaving it in the cold liquid long

enough to kill every living thing on it, but removing it before his skin started to dissolve.

Next, he leaned forwards so that the mirrors he had arranged over his desk reflected the socket in his skull clearly. Ever so carefully, he peeled away the plastek patch with his left hand.

He pushed the intelligence core home with a quick, robust movement. It was important it be done firmly. An electric jag fizzed through his mind. The click as it slid into place echoed in the bone behind his nose.

'Now,' he said. 'The moment of truth.'

With the edge of a fingernail, he depressed the reset switch concealed beneath the black-and-white machina opus adorning the top of the core. Either he would be rewarded with a greater capacity for knowledge, or his brain would be cooked from the inside out.

Red diode lumens lit up around the rim of the core. When they had formed a circle, they blinked and turned green.

Cawl relaxed; he had tensed without realising it. He smiled brightly as the machine interfaced again with his brain, imposing useful readouts over his vision. Storage capacity read at twenty-five per cent full.

'Threefold increase, Tez-Lar!' he said happily. Then frowned.

He had not time to tidy away his tools. He had to trust no curious adept would glance into his room as he left it.

Cawl hurried out of his quarters, Tez-Lar stamping behind him.

He was already late.

He left his other important work forgotten at the edge of his desk, a silver sphere with a power that would rival the domina's, when it was finished.

The sphere had to wait. He had duties to attend to.

FOUR

Four Brothers

Five days after his meeting with Loken, Russ was in his lair poring over blueprint flimsies of the *Vengeful Spirit*. He had them laid out all over the floor, and he squatted in the middle, one hand curled around his chin. The flimsies covered the fur rugs. They butted against the furniture. They waved in the heat draught of the firebowls. Their edges were weighted with bones and empty wooden bowls still dirty with past meals. Data-slates bearing information regarding the *Vengeful Spirit's* capabilities and past actions glowed on the floor. A miniature light sculpture of Horus' ship spun slowly over the projection lens of a portable hololith. On a bronze table sat a metre-long scale model of the ship, several of the segments removed to show the internal layout. Over its carefully machined components of brass, steel and bone Russ had daubed red runes, marking out the damaged sections described to him by Bror. Luminous strips of sticky paper showed the path of the Knights Errant, and denoted important targets. The damage runes were prolific. The war was wearing on. The *Vengeful Spirit* had had as little time as the *Hrafnkel* to refit. That was a small equalising factor in his favour.

Freki and Geri's breathing thrummed the air with restful infrasound, aiding the primarch's concentration. Their presence comforted him. The smell of a Fenrisian wolf was the smell of home: hot, animal, primal. They were fragments of the home world's savagery let loose among the stars. A childhood on Fenris robbed the galaxy of wonder. There was no other place so well provisioned with monsters; it was a dream world that straddled the boundaries of myth. Everywhere else was dull by comparison.

Russ enjoyed the challenge before him. The complexities of attacking an enemy flagship protected by a large fleet took his mind from the probable result of his mission. Horus was more than likely to kill him. Even if the attack were successful, his Legion would be shattered.

Neither of these probabilities dissuaded him. Horus had failed in his role as Emperor's Warmaster. Russ would not shirk from his duty as executioner.

The clear note of a carynx rang out from the door to his chambers. Russ stood, and arched his back, stretching out his muscles. He had spent too long in one position.

'Enter!' he called.

The door rolled aside. Grimnr Blackblood stood in the entrance. He slammed his fist against his chest in salute.

'My jarl,' he said. 'I have an urgent message from the far-talkers.' Grimnr held out a sealed message tube.

'Bring it here,' said Russ.

Grimnr picked his way through the plans covering the primarch's chamber, no mean feat in full power armour. Geri looked up lazily. His head thumped back to the floor when he saw who had come. Within two breaths he was snoring again.

Russ took the tube and tore off the crimped lead seals. He tipped out the rolled paper inside. He made a noise in his throat as he read.

'Good tidings or bad?'

'Good,' said Russ. 'My brother Sanguinius has entered the Solar System. There is to be a welcome, and then a council.' He rolled up the paper and tapped it back into the tube with the palm of his hand. 'They're not going to like what I have to tell them.'

'You've made it clear since the beginning you intended to go after Horus.'

'Dorn assumes I have changed my mind. He is dogged that way. He won't accept I haven't.'

'Perhaps you should send a message ahead, outlining your plans. Take the sting out of our leaving?'

Russ laughed sadly. 'And spoil my chance for a little drama? You must think more boldly, my son. Consider how the sagas will remember you. I shall make the skjald's task easier by adding a little tension to the story of my thread. Inform my blademakers and armourers.'

'You will go armoured?'

Russ nodded. 'My panoply should look its best. Appearances matter in circumstances like these.'

'At once, my jarl.'

Russ sniffed, and looked over his shoulder to where the Emperor's Spear leaned in a weapon's rack.

'I'd better take that bloody thing with me,' he said. 'Find someone willing to polish it. I would not wish to disappoint my father, if He decides to show His face.'

The ships of the Blood Angels sailed in to Terran high orbit escorted by craft of the Imperial Fists. From their broadsides Dorn's fleet cast out an endless stream of pyrotechnics, showering the red ships of the IX Legion in bursts of light. The celebratory display did little to hide the realities of war. Sanguinius' flotilla was storm-wracked and battleworn. Many of his craft had not made it to Terra. Very few of those that had were intact. Black scoring marred their livery. The burned-

out cavities of voided decks riddled their skins. In this they were like the ships of Sanguinius' brothers. They were all living on borrowed time.

Sights of damage were kept from the populace at large. Where the ships were subject to pict documentary, they were shot from flattering angles and their wounds touched up by vidcast painters. Sanguinius' fleet put into anchor, the most heavily damaged towed by void tug to the few free dry docks. With many of the Jovian shipyards destroyed by Kelbor-Hal, and Mars' Ring of Iron inaccessible on the other side of the blockade, Terra's more modest facilities were over-subscribed.

Picters captured Sanguinius' descent from the heavens and broadcast it around the system. Flights of red-liveried gunships roared down through the layered smogs of humanity's birthplace, flying in formation over dry seabeds and the hives of worn-out continents. War-weary men and women looked skywards, and felt their hearts lift as the Lord of Angels cut across the yellow sky. That was all they saw of the Emperor's most perfect son. Like a true angel, Sanguinius soared high over the lives of mortals without once noticing them. His feet never touched Terra's common soil. He flew directly for Himalazia and the Imperial Palace at the top of the world.

The Blood Angels approached the Palace in perfect formation. Four Thunderhawks and a Stormbird touched down upon a landing platform extending from the inside of a tower near the Heavenward Gate. The remainder peeled away and made for the landing fields of the Lion's Gate spaceport. The streets were thronged by the menials of a thousand Palace organisations. Bells rang in acclamation. Floating servo-skulls and other less honoured drones buzzed overhead. The cheers of a million people were a constant noise. Flights of atmospheric craft screamed across the sky, dropping bombs of coloured smoke. Hololiths filled the air with celebratory images. Fireworks boomed and crackled over the domes and spires of the Palace.

The Blood Angels' lead craft set down in a fan, the Stormbird at the centre, their noses pointing towards the group who had come to greet the primarch.

By a large open, armoured gate, Rogal Dorn, Leman Russ, Jaghatai Khan, Malcador the Sigillite and the assembled leaders of the Imperial defence forces waited for the returned Lord of Angels. Heavily modified magi from the newly formed Adeptus Mechanicus waited with decorated generals of the Solar Auxilia, Titan princeps and a myriad others. The lords of the councils of Terra attended, if their duties allowed. The few absent had sent high-ranked deputies in their place, and primed them with elaborate apologies.

Doors opened in the gunships. From them Blood Angels leapt and ran onto the platform.

Warriors in gold and red formed an honour guard for their lord. As soon as they were arrayed, the Stormbird dropped its ramp and Sanguinius walked out. He made straight for his brothers, his pace hurried. The winds of the covered mountains ruffled the feathers of his wings.

Rogal Dorn reached out and clasped the arm of the Blood Angels' primarch.

'We are most pleased to greet you, our brother.'

Once, Sanguinius had had a radiant smile whose beauty pierced the heart. It carried only sorrow now. His eye sockets were purpled, his gaze haunted. 'My journey has been too long and fraught with unimaginable horror. I am glad to be here at last.' Sanguinius glanced over the crowd. 'Father is not here. Where is He? I could not sense Him.'

'Your father wishes you to know He is overjoyed at your return,' said Malcador.

'Where is the Emperor?' asked Sanguinius. Of all the primarchs, he was the most beautiful. Mortal men wept to look upon his image. A live feed of his arrival was shown all over the Palace. Cheers turned to moans of adulation.

'It is a long story,' said the Khan.

'One without a resolution,' said Russ archly. 'Though some might know more than others.' He looked meaningfully at Dorn and Malcador.

'He is unavailable, and labours in the Imperial Dungeon,' said Malcador. 'But know that He works as strenuously as the rest of us to bring Horus' rebellion to an end.'

Sensing something amiss, Sanguinius did not press the matter. Dorn nodded behind him, and the assembly of dignitaries dispersed, leaving the primarchs with the regent on the landing pad.

'There are refreshments for your legionaries,' said Malcador. 'But we must talk now. I apologise you shall have no time to rest.' Sanguinius nodded.

'*We* must. Much has occurred. Much that is troubling.'

'More troubling than Horus' rebellion?' said Russ.

Sanguinius gave Russ a cold stare. The stare of a dead man.

'You have no idea, Leman,' said Sanguinius. He blinked, and the dread his words conveyed blew away on the wind. 'Is the Emperor well?' asked Sanguinius. 'Tell me that at least. We thought Him dead, Guilliman, the Lion and I, until the storm parted and we saw that the Astronomican still burned. I expected to see Him here.'

'He is alive,' said Dorn. 'You will have to take that on faith, brother.' Sanguinius looked out over the city-sized Palace, where the celebration of his arrival continued.

'Is it not dangerous, this level of joy? We mislead the people. We I are a long way from victory.'

Malcador leaned on his staff, his white, leonine mane streaming behind him. 'Your return to us is a source of genuine happiness,' he said.

'Brother primarchs unite on Terra as Sanguinius returns. *It* is hollow theatre. I have had enough of pomp,' said the Great Angel. He appeared exhausted, looking on all he saw from a distant place.

'Theatre is necessary,' said Malcador. 'The hearts of men must be fired with joy to burn away despair.'

'Despair will only be overthrown by victory,' said Sanguinius.

'Indeed,' said Malcador. He let go of his staff with one hand and gestured through the gate. 'Then let us speak.'

The five most powerful men on Terra passed inside the tower. Adamantium gates closed soundlessly, sealing out the jubilation of the crowds.

They retired to private chambers warded by every technological and arcane art known to man. Silent Adeptus Custodes set a guard on the outside. Within, Sanguinius told his tale. He did not tell them everything. He could not. How could an angel put into words the temptations of Chaos? Twice he had been enticed to betray his father. Twice it had been intimated to him that it was he, not Horus, who was the favoured vessel for Chaos' power. In the eyes of others he was an angel; in his own mind his wings were the surest sign of Chaos' touch.

But he would not fall.

So he glossed over the temptations of Ka'Bandha and Kyriss at Signus Prime, and the attempts of Madail at Davin to make him into something more terrible than the Warmaster. The existence of Imperium Secundus he kept to himself. Guilliman's motives in establishing the second realm were pure, but they could so easily be read as treachery, and his own role of Emperor of that short-lived empire he wished to forget. He had too many secrets, and though he would have gladly unburdened himself to his father, he was not willing to take the same risk with his brothers and Malcador, He felt the old psyker's powerful mind probing at his own as he spoke, scratching at the veracity of his words to see if falsehood lay beneath. Sanguinius had enough psychic might of his own to deflect the regent, though resistance alone would be more than enough to rouse the old man's suspicion.

He told them everything else. In a quiet voice he revealed to them the true might of the Neverborn and the sorceries they deployed. He spoke of rains of blood and planets caged in bone. He disbelieved half of what he said, though he had seen it all with his own eyes.

'Such things they can do,' he said, 'as make Magnus' mightiest works seem parlour tricks.'

He told them of the Shadow Crusade, where Lorgar and the transformed Angron had laid waste to dozens of worlds, of Konrad Curze's reign of terror on

Macragge, of his own conversations with their tormented brother. He let his sympathy show for the Night Haunter, for that was genuine. He told them of the assault on the Pharos, of the mission to Davin and the hellish transformation wrought upon that world. And finally of how he, the Lion and Guilliman had destroyed the site of Horus' corruption, and how in doing so they had brought about the calming of the Ruinstorm, and the horrors that travelling through the warp presented in this strange new age. To all but Malcador, Sanguinius looked distracted, as if he had larger matters to ponder. Only the Imperial Regent could fathom how large the secrets were that he kept, and his shrewd eyes stayed fixed on the primarch's face the entire time that he spoke.

By the time Sanguinius had finished relating his tale and his brothers had asked him their questions, it was late evening. High levels of atmospheric pollution rendered the sunsets of Terra gloriously colourful. The tower room where they talked was saturated in deep orange light.

Conversation turned inevitably to what should be done next. Dorn activated a hololith depicting the whole wheel of the galaxy. Sunlight streamed through it, staining the stars bloody. 'This is our disposition,' said Dorn. 'Here, at Terra, we now have four Legions. The Lion pursues his policy of vengeance. Guilliman harries the traitors as he advances upon Terra.'

'He should have come directly,' said Jaghatai. 'Swift movement wins battles.'

'He thought it better one Legion got through rather than none,' said Sanguinius. 'Between them, the Lion and Guilliman have split the traitors' forces. We will have fewer enemy to face when Horus' hammer blow falls. Lion El'Jonson bleeds his strength, Guilliman pushes him on towards us. Their diversions allowed me through. We are at last in a position to dictate the course of the war. We can win.'

'We are also split,' said the Khan. 'Six Legions could have been here.'

'They outnumber us greatly,' said Sanguinius. 'Dividing their forces was the wisest action. They cannot be allowed to bring their full might to bear here.'

Dorn nodded. 'Sanguinius is right. The Lion's campaign will buy us time, and Guilliman's activities give us the precious gift of choosing our own timing.'

'How much time?' said the Khan.

'It doesn't matter how much time we gain,' said Russ. 'It isn't enough. We have seen Sanguinius' ships, the Khan's.' Russ drank deeply of his wine. 'Mine. Our fleets are depleted. Mars is in open revolt. We do not have *time*, brothers. Horus still has two choices, he can attack us here, and smash what little remains of our strength, or wear us down by slow degree until there is nothing left. Either way, he wins.'

The Angel and the Wolf are more similar than they appear, thought Sanguinius. I am refined on the surface and savage within, Russ is the opposite. How many mirrorings like these did the Emperor engineer into His sons? And why? He

thought of Curze, another, darker reflection of himself. 'That was true a few weeks ago,' said Dorn. 'His hand is forced. Thanks to the actions of our brothers the Ruinstorm is blowing out. Now we can muster our strength, he will attack directly. He will wish to lay siege to Terra before Guilliman can bring his warriors here from Ultramar. With the Lion laying waste to the traitor's domains, his own ability to reinforce will be compromised. There will be no attrition now. We are engaged in a race.'

'Guilliman's Legion is largely intact,' said Sanguinius. 'And he can call upon the full might of the Five Hundred Worlds. Lorgar and Angron wrought havoc there but Guilliman's realm is large and well organised. His is the largest Legion. Horus' forces have all suffered losses, many of them self-inflicted. Do not overestimate their strength. Horus will move against us soon, when he does not wish to.'

'I do not doubt it,' said Russ. 'Still, we have no opportunity to replenish our fleets. We are not ready to bear the brunt of an assault on Terra. Alpharius' incursion should have taught us that.'

A muscle twinge at the line of Dorn's silver hair betrayed his annoyance at Russ' statement 'You are also correct. We do need to strike back,' said Dorn. 'Now we have provoked him, we have to slow the Warmaster. If fortune is with us, we might even stop him before he gets to Terra. We can decide this strategy. It is now the Warmaster who must react and not us.'

'Facing him before our forces are gathered will cost a lot of blood,' said Russ.

'Where do you propose we make this stand?' said the Khan.

'We have so many Titans here,' said Dorn. 'We cannot unleash them upon Terra. Their kind of war would be the undoing of the Throneworld. My intention is to hold Horus at Beta-Garmon.' The system in question blinked. The hololith zoomed into it at a gesture from Dorn. He pointed at it with his calloused, craftsman's hand. 'Seven major warp routes cross here. It has been contested since the beginning of the war. If we commit the majority of our forces to Beta-Garmon, we can hold Horus and our traitorous brothers there.'

'And grind them out like cinders,' said Sanguinius. 'I do not see a better proposition.'

Russ shook his head. 'It brings us back to attrition. They have the numbers. If we cannot best Horus quickly there, he will overcome us. Once Beta-Garmon is lost, the way to Terra is open. What will we defend ourselves with then?'

'This kind of defensive war is your preference, Rogal,' said the Khan, 'but it is not to my liking. We risk becoming ensnared there. There are other routes to Terra. He could hold our forces in place at Beta-Garmon and outflank us.'

'Our hunting brother is right,' said Russ. 'Beta-Garmon is a hell trap, and one that will too easily divide our forces, for must we not retain a portion of our

strength here to fortify Terra? Fight him there, we are divided, fight him here, he has time to gather his strength. Horus has us outmanoeuvred.'

'Any battle at Beta-Garmon will be bloody, there is no doubt of that,' said Dorn. 'The casualty figures I have projected are high, but they are bearable, and they will give us more time to fortify Terra. Guilliman will come from the galactic south-east, and trap Horus either at Beta-Garmon, or if he breaks through, against the wall of iron I have cast about this world.'

Russ set down his goblet. 'You are forgetting something.'

'What am I forgetting, Leman?' said Dorn.

'We are assuming that Horus intends to strike with his full might at Terra. Why should he do so? If I were Horus, I would set the Iron Warriors to guard my back. The warp, though passable, is in turmoil. Horus still has a strategic advantage in travel speed. You can be assured he will not waste it He need only delay Guilliman for a short time, not confront him head on, and he will be able to bring overwhelming force against Beta-Garmon, then Terra, destroying our armies piece by piece.'

'It is plausible, probable even, but I doubt the Warmaster anticipated the destruction of Davin,' said Dorn. 'Reinforcements arrive from all over the Imperium every day, and now the storm abates they come more quickly. We have access to the astrotelepathic network again, and so we exert greater control over loyalist factions. At Beta-Garmon, and at Terra, Horus will face far larger armies than he expected. He will know this, he will rush, and he will make errors. This is the race, to see who will be ready soonest.'

'To rely on armies one does not have yet is to rely on the wind,' said Jaghatai. 'You never know which way it will blow.'

'Aye, that is why he will run for Terra as quickly as he can,' said Russ. 'We do not have time to reinforce either system sufficiently.'

'I think I already said that.' He poured more wine from a tall ewer and drank it down in one.

'That is why we need to whittle him down while we can, Russ. I suggest you make for Acanto Myphos, where you will find large concentrations of the Alpha Legion. I am sure you would welcome the chance to tackle them again. Surely you would wish to have your vengeance upon them?'

'I would,' said Russ. 'They would never pay *weregild,* would they?' He smiled. 'So they must die.'

'I know you too well to take that as an agreement,' said Dorn.

'It is not,' admitted Russ. 'Do you know what I think?'

'You are going to tell me,' said Dorn wearily.

Russ leaned forwards and gripped his knees. The Khan watched their exchange with interest.

'It will not work.'

'This is the best course of action. Divide. Hold. Reinforce, pin him between our armies here and Guilliman's Thirteenth,' insisted Dorn.

'If we are talking about defence, then maybe it is,' said Russ. 'And in defending, we will come close to victory, and we will fail at the last.'

Dorn gripped his stylus tightly. 'Then what would you do?'

Russ sighed in regret. 'I will not be joining this effort at Beta-Garmon you have planned, my brother. I have business of my own to settle with the Warmaster, and I will do so in person.'

Dorn glared at him. 'Explain yourself.'

'Do I need to? I made my intentions known the moment I arrived here. The time has come. I am taking my warriors, and I am leaving,' said Russ. 'Can I make it clearer for you, praetorian? I am the Emperor's Executioner, I will perform my duties. I never said otherwise.'

'I thought you would see sense.'

'If that is sense, then no, I have yet to glimpse it.'

'Have you heard the rumours about what has happened to Horus?' said Dorn. 'He will kill you, and you will lose us this war.'

'He has grown powerful, my brother,' said the Khan.

'If Jaghatai cautions you, then you should listen,' said Sanguinius. 'Of all of us, he is most akin to you in mind.'

'Jaghatai must follow his own path, as I must follow mine,' said Russ. 'And my path leads me to the Warmaster. That is my wyrd, as it always was. Nothing has changed.'

'Everything has changed! You cannot kill him alone!' said Dorn. 'You are throwing your life and your Legion away. This is madness.'

Russ tapped his chest with his armoured hand. 'My life. My Legion.

'I will return to Fenris, where my priests will question the spirit of my world and learn Horus' vulnerability. He will have one, every monster does. I will exploit it, and I will strike him down before he comes within a light year of Terra.'

Dorn snorted.

'You think me a fool, brother?' said Russ, with dangerous innocence.

'I think you are reckless. I think you are in danger of treading the same road as Magnus, or Lorgar, cavorting with priests. Where has your conviction gone? Where is the wolf who spoke at Nikaea?'

This stung Russ, and his smile dropped. 'Nikaea was another trick. Another manipulation. Why do you think our enemies duped us into abandoning the Librarius? Why do you think I was tricked into killing Magnus?'

'You express regret for that now?' said Dorn. 'Last I heard you I were crowing about it.'

'I have crowed. I do crow. I am proud of what I did. When attacked, Magnus resorted to powers he should never have unleashed, and he deserved what he got for that alone. But things could have been different. Horus lied to me because they fear the power of the warp. He feared Magnus' sorcery. It is what the enemy *are*. It is what will beat them.'

Dorn sighed sadly, and looked down at his slate of plans. 'And that is Magnus talking.'

Sanguinius roused himself from his miserable introspection. 'Do you believe you were wrong at Nikaea, Leman?'

'Perhaps,' said Russ honestly. 'But I was not wrong to call for Magnus' sanction, nor was I wrong to call for the suppression of the Librarius as it was. Who knows where Magnus' path would have led had he been let alone? He might have won the war, but would we then have had another Horus to contend with, or maybe two? The Librarius could have proven as poisonous as the thrice-damned lodges.'

'The great proponent of the Nikaean edict, who kept his own sorcerers. You have many qualities, my brother,' said Dorn. 'I never thought to say hypocrisy was one.'

'Is it? The priests of my Legion and the Stormseers of Jaghatai's are different to the Librarians that were. Our warriors draw on an older tradition. A limited tradition. Magnus did not believe in limits. That was his error.'

'Similar traditions were outlawed by our father on every world,' said Dorn hotly.

'We have seen where His close-mouthedness on the matter of the warp has got us,' Russ scoffed.

Sanguinius made a silent gesture of agreement.

'Leman is right,' said the Khan. 'Our seers do not draw directly on the warp. Their gifts are mediated. We know what limits are.'

'Limits on power?' said Dorn. 'Power has no limits. Every morsel of power engenders more hunger. It is never satisfied. A man's soul needs to be a fortress.'

'Not limits of power, Rogal,' said Jaghatai. 'Our limits are those of human wisdom. You look for enlightenment in the wrong place. Wisdom is the limit that must be observed.'

'So now humility can tame the powers of the warp,' said Dorn. 'This is ridiculous.'

'Humility is one of the ways,' said Jaghatai. 'Our father is a psyker, so is Sanguinius, and Malcador.'

'The enemy fears the warp as much as they plunge themselves into it,' said Leman Russ. 'We must use it,' he held up his hands, 'safely, to help us win this war.'

'I still name you hypocrite. How can you stand it, Jaghatai? He opposed you at Nikaea.'

'That was then, this is now Dwelling on the past will solve nothing,' said the Khan. 'We must stand united.'

Dorn shook his head. 'Whatever your intentions on Fenris may be, they are unimportant to the defence of Terra. What concerns me is that you will not be here where father needs you.'

'If it is for father to decide where I should be and where I should not, why isn't He here?' Russ looked around, as if the Emperor of Mankind might be hiding behind the drapes. 'What is He doing in the Dungeon?'

Dorn hung his head. 'I do not know.'

'I think perhaps you might,' said Russ. 'You do. And you do too, don't you, Malcador?'

The regent said nothing.

'You won't tell us. I tell you what,' said Russ, 'if our father Himself comes forth and commands me to remain, and tells me that my decided course will end in disaster, then I will stay.' Russ stood up, threw his arms out and shouted to the ceiling. 'Do you hear that, father? Can you hear me? I plea for guidance!' He cocked his head dramatically to one side, then let his arms drop.

'Nothing,' Russ whispered. 'He says nothing. So I will go. Forgive me, my brothers, I have preparations to make. I wish you good fortune with your Great Muster at Beta-Garmon.'

Russ took up his spear and strode from the room.

'Leman!' shouted Dorn, his face turning red. 'Leman, come back!' He launched himself upwards, scattering data-slates, cups and refreshments in his haste to catch his brother.

Sanguinius grabbed him by the arm. The charms on his wings rattled as his feathers shifted and settled.

'Let him be. There are many ways to serve our lord in this war,' said Sanguinius.

Malcador stood, sighing at the cracking in his joints. 'Listen to Sanguinius, Dorn. Let Russ tread his own path,' said Malcador. He looked through the door Russ had left by. 'It is different to yours.'

Brother primarchs unite on Terra as Sanguinius returns.

FIVE

Trisolian

There were windows along part of Cawl's route that looked down at the vast, milky ball of Trisolian A-2. Someone, somewhen a long time ago had marked its name as Etrian upon the star charts. Nobody knew quite why, but if the name meant cold, small and unimpressive, it wouldn't have surprised Cawl.

Trisolian was a three-star system. At the system core was the primary, Trisolian A, a large blue-white star in the mid-stages of life with a solar output several million times that of Sol. The other two stars were a pair of tidally locked red dwarfs that orbited Trisolian A at a distance a thousand times further than Neptune was from Sol.

Though an inconceivable distance to the average human mind, the stars were dangerously close in stellar terms. The system's four planets suffered insanely erratic orbits and were tormented by conflicting solar winds. This type of star system was common in the galaxy, but it was rare to find habitable worlds there, or planets at all. Worlds around such stars were catapulted into space during their formation, or torn apart before they were born. Those that did survive were inevitably rad-blasted into sterility.

Trisolian was no fit place for a human being, but the conditions that made Trisolian dangerous to human life made it useful to humanity. An unusual combination of gravitational flux and aggressive solar winds turned the four worlds into cosmic forges. Their atmospheres were rich with exotic heavy elements and precious isotopes.

It was the Heptaligon's purpose to coordinate the harvest of these things.

Each of the four planets had their own city-sized orbital mining platforms, but the Heptaligon was the largest of them, comprising seven stations anchored by tether-tubes driven right the way through the icy heart of Etrian's lonely moonlet, Momus. The interior of Momus had been hollowed out, and was also inhabited. Between the tube-tethers, long strings of macro-cabling tied the stations together in a complex web, suspending subsidiary platforms between the main, and allowing transit between all points on a bewildering number of routes. Although involved in resource acquisition itself, the Heptaligon's main purpose was to act as the processing hub for all elements harvested from the system. In Momus'

frigid centre, various gaseous compounds were compressed into ingots of bizarre metals, then shipped up the tether-tubes to station Prima for out-system export.

As the Heptaligon was the nearest thing Trisolian could boast to a civilised world, it hosted the capital, its military command, organs of governance and so forth. This was no different to thousands of other similar outposts all over human space, and under normal circumstances Trisolian would have remained a backwater, had it not been for the major warp conduit that passed through the system on the way to the strategically vital nexus system of Beta-Garmon.

Trisolian was Mechanicum. There had been overtures from the Imperium that the operations be turned over to Terran control, but the Martian Synod, unwilling to relinquish a potentially vital strategic asset, had dithered and procrastinated for years, all the while apportioning other roles to the Trisolian cities to increase their importance until, finally, Trisolian four had collectively been designated as a forge world, with all the rights and responsibilities thereof.

Trisolian's position made it politically important. So the Trisolian System remained Martian, whatever that meant in those uncertain times.

Though the war was far away it impacted on every aspect of station life. Fuel they had plenty of. Water was scarce but could be sourced from the miserably poor cometary belt of the outer system. Food was trickier to provide, grown in the enormous underground agrifarms of Trisolian A-3. Parts and machinery were in shorter supply still. Trisolian had an abundance of treasure, but a dearth of simpler materials. Flesh and metal suffered together. Organics were malnourished. Many an adept was getting by on bionics held together by jury-rigged repairs.

Whatever the privations they must suffer, Cawl said to Friedisch, others lived under worse circumstances, and the mining must go on for the good of the Imperium. Their work was important, if not particularly glamorous.

Domina Hester Aspertia Sigma-Sigma, supreme magos militara of Trisolian, was not pleased when Cawl reached the Extraction Protection Operations Centre in Quinta station.

She whirled around to face him as he hurried through the door, all six spiked, aggressive metres of her.

'Tech Acolytum Belisarius Cawl,' she augmitted in simultaneous Gothic, binaric, Ryzan-form Lingua Technis and an obscure form of Novabyte Cawl had only ever heard from her vox-speakers. 'You're late.' The noosphere around her seethed with digital animosity. Pistons and gears whined as a dozen tech-adepts tensed under the domina's wide-cast anger.

'I am late, domina,' said Cawl, with a short bow, attempting to hurry past her to his station. 'I am most sorry, I have been delayed with experiments of my own and—'

'Silence!' she blurted. A torrent of binaric invective poured out of her, so vile in nature Tez-Lar twitched. She ran at Cawl, her mechapeds rattling off the deck like stubber fire punching through a corrugated plasteel sheet. 'Tardiness is proximate to inefficiency. Inefficiency is proximate to obsolescence. Do you wish me to enact an order of decommission?'

'No, domina,' said Cawl. He hunched low and grovelled. The domina liked that sort of thing from her inferiors.

'Or perhaps you would prefer to join my skitarii, in order to serve me better. They, tech acolytum, are never, ever *late*!'

Cawl glanced sideways to the door where a pair of the domina's personal guard stood sentry. Resplendent in brass and grey, they were as inert as robots, with no sign of independent life. The domina's skitarii were little better than tech thralls. Rumour had it she kept their cortexes offline, operating them directly at all times. Their minds were trapped in a perpetual rapture, drugged by communion with the Motive Force. Some of the machine cult would welcome the fate, but Cawl quailed inwardly at the thought. Independence was all to him.

'To your place!' The domina reared up to her full height. Her loose robe parted a moment, allowing a glimpse of the metal canisters attached to her chest like so many swine at the teat. The cylinders rattled across a patchwork of copper cabling and plasteel plates, the things inside fed by a tangle of wires and tubes. She snatched her gown back across them. 'The second shift is due to commence its descent into the middle reaches, and they are waiting for our support. Impatiently Waiting.'

'Once again, my apologies, domina,' said Cawl. He sent Tez-Lar away to his own station with a pulsed thought code.

Aspertia Sigma-Sigma swept off, mechadendrites waving around her shoulders like serpents ready to strike.

'Provost Acquisitor Mu-Nine-Nine, we are ready to provide escort.'

A steel-faced adept appeared on a floating pict screen, painted in shades of blue and heavily banded with image writing lines. All the viewers on the station were of that type. Their projection elements were made of semi-living light-emitting diodes whose chemistry was harvested from deep sea bacteria. This form of display resisted the radioactive squalls of the system best.

Cawl had learned how to make the displays during a brief stint working for a Lexmechanic Imagificatio. It was amazing what one could pick up in a place like Trisolian.

Extraction Protection Operations was a five-tiered room fronted by a massive, semi-circular window looking down on Etrian. At the left edge of the view Heptaligon Station Quarta was visible as an oblate, steely mirror reflecting the planet's glow. The tether-tube holding it out from the moon was a needle of light.

At the bottom of the window the crusted surface of Momus lurked. The sun bathed everything in a snowfield glare so harsh it was painful to look upon.

The tiers of the room were full of control decks for the protection automata, and each one was lavishly supplied with imaging equipment that shone with the same, uncompromising light. Cawl hurried down three flights of stairs to his station and slipped into the uncomfortable chair. Tri-d light weaves popped up around him. A miniature hololith flicked on directly in front of his face. Status readouts for the three drones under his command activated as the desk sensed his presence. Auto-prayers burbled from its speakers as the machine self-blessed.

The drones were presented as red, outline schematics, their outer surfaces rendered translucent to show the condition of the subsystems beneath their armour. Automaton One's port engines glowed a troubling orange.

Cawl tutted. He had been told Automaton One had been repaired. He glanced back at the domina. She was engaged in conversation with the provost acquisitor. Her primary hands were still twitching with annoyance. Now was not the time to bring it up.

Cawl pulled out a steel-cased communion cable and slotted it into a socket behind his ear. The spring retractor was overwound and the cable pulled annoyingly at the side of his head, forcing his neck into an uncomfortable position.

He partitioned his consciousness, parcelling it out between the three automata and the flight desk. Facilitated by his superior intelligence core, the view in his mind's eye split into quadrants. The top of his field of vision was occupied by the view of the operations room gathered by his mortal eyes. The lower half was split into three pict fields, each showing a view from one of the automata's augurs. In the sharp images, the world of Etrian loomed large.

'Stand by for clamp retraction!' The domina half sang the words. They were accompanied by a data-rich stream of binaric. A quartet of eyeless servitors began a hymn of safe launching. Tez-Lar joined his rich voice to the song at a silent command from Cawl.

The real world retreated. Screed rolled up the side of Cawl's view; the back and forth between the domina and the provost acquisitor rendered into glowing green text and the runs of zeroes and ones of rapid, augment-to-augment binaric.

A larger panel of text blinked through his awareness.

<Extractors launched!> it announced, demanding he acknowledge. Pulses of electricity ran seamlessly from the organic pathways of his brain into the nano-wires grafted to his nervous system and out into the machine world, confirming he had received the message. Truly, the Machine-God worked marvels.

He swivelled Automaton Two's visual array downwards. Five extractor scows were dropping fast towards Trisolian A-2, They were massive things, not true

spacecraft but large, raft-like structures crewed by adepts garbed in huge, armoured environment suits. Bulky servitors and rad-hardened automata assisted them. Reminiscent of the baleen of extinct Terran cetaceans, the scows' fronts sported huge, spreading vanes of copper, between which were threaded thousands of kilometres of fine wires. These 'jaws' projected a magnetic funnel that directed the desired gases into separation units. From there the harvest was pumped into bulbous clusters of containment tanks running the length of the vessel.

Dozens of massive hemispherical directional impellers occupied the scows' undersides. Viewed side-on, the grav-motors and the power plants to run them dominated the craft, like the hidden portions of icebergs. They made up the majority of the craft's mass. Etrian had a hard pull.

The extractor scows dropped fast towards the racing clouds of the gas giant. The tiny figures walking the decks dwindled to dots.

'Flight release,' commanded the domina. And by her thoughts and her words, so it was done.

'All praise the Machine-God. All praise the Omnissiah who is his messenger. All praise the Motive Force by which he moves among us,' the drone operators chanted.

Cawl's split view lurched and the three-part image diversified. If he didn't concentrate, the conflicting input would make him nauseous. His charges were falling. Thruster bursts sent them hurtling after the falling scows. The crewed decks flashed past, he had the briefest glimpse of an armoured adept directing his underlings, then the scows were above his machines. The clouds raced up to greet him.

The robots were practically autonomous. Their programming took them down into the surging currents of the gas giant without much input, but such were the challenges of operating in Etrian's frigid methane atmosphere that each flight of three required human over sight. The robots' wetware were not up to the task alone.

Incredibly, there were things alive down there, and they did not like visitors.

Cawl's view shook as the automata encountered the upper layers of Trisolian A-2's atmosphere Flight smoothed out a little as they penetrated the upper cloud layers and plunged down deeper through counter-rotating strata of gas. As they reached their destination some hundred kilometres within, the feed smoothed further, finally settling into crisp sharpness as Cawl activated the system's delicate image stabilisers. Icons flicked on his displays. Minor tocsins rang. The environment stressed the machines. Such small shrieks of alarm were normal.

Thirty Vultarax stratos-automata spread out into a polyhedral protection configuration. Cawl, whose machines were in the uppermost part of the formation, jinked his flight aside. The scows dropped through the gap into the

protective cordon, spread out, and made ready to begin resource gathering. Cawl swerved his automata back into position. His upgraded intelligence core gave him a seven per cent efficiency gain over his fellow cloud riders. He reined in his desire to show off. That sort of thing could get him caught.

The operation followed the pattern it did every day. The scows took up a formation designed to maximise resource extraction. The thick atmosphere glowed with ionisation as the collectors' magnetic arrays activated. Trailing coronal discharge from their static bleed fins, the scows began their work.

Cawl looked out over the boiling clouds. In some places vortexes carved wells several hundred kilometres deep, and he peered towards the planet's busy heart down throats of twisting gases lined with veins of lightning. His machines would bounce and judder violently as they passed over these holes, but their images remained eerily still, their automatic adjustment a blessing of man's technological wisdom. Every stratum of the atmosphere crackled with light conjured from friction. Wet snows of frozen ethane and methane slapped against the drones' armoured carapaces. Exotic lightning forms danced like live things upon the cloud tops. The display delighted Cawl. And yet the true glories were down in the gas giant's unobtainable centre, where massive pressure compressed methane into bizarre super ices, and the freezing temperatures of the upper levels escalated at a geometric rate to levels greater than those on the surfaces of stars.

Men weren't meant to exist in such a place, but there they were. Cawl was proud of that. Such things mankind had achieved. Such things he might achieve again.

During these periods of quiet, the automata could perform most of their duties without intervention. Cawl kept half an eye on what they were doing. He was not particularly interested in the holy study of robotics. It was fascinating, but his passion remained for bioengineering. Still, he had much to learn from the Legio Cybernetica and their grasp of the artificial mind. He could not ignore any facet of the Ars Mechanica if he were to achieve his ambitions of complete technological mastery.

Knowledge was all he craved. Cawl's lack of patience for politics and position was already becoming known. The amount of time he had left before he had to stop changing role was running out. He wondered what he should do next. Perhaps now was the time to apply himself fully to the role of biologian. Once he had accrued a little power and a little status in that sub-cult, he could recommence his wider-ranging exploration of science. That was permitted.

His wandering thoughts were abruptly refocused by an alarm chime.

<Hostile xenoforms approaching, my warriors,> said the domina, her voice reaching the speech centres of his brain via direct inload. <Prepare to intercept>

An auspex grid showed several hundred small dots converging on the extractors' position. They moved quickly, in straight lines against the wind, coming obliquely at the flotilla from the rear.

<A large shoal,> canted the domina. <Maniples seven through ten, reverse course to engage. The rest of you close up the net. Let the scows work as long as they can.>

Screed informed Cawl of a request from the Acquisitor Provost sent wordlessly to Aspertia Sigma-Sigma.

Status inquiry. There's a lot of them today. Shall we turn back?

Negative, read the domina's reply.

Cawl jinked his maniple of automata to close up the gap as nine robots left the formation and headed for the rear. The area of protection around the extractors shrunk by twenty per cent.

The Vultaraxes, sensoria could not rotate backwards, and so Cawl could not see what happened behind the formation. But the sound of autocannon fire carried over the wind to the machines' audio sensors.

A shrieking alarm from a nearby flight desk, quickly silenced, signified the loss of the first automaton. Lesser alarms spoke of heavy damage to two more.

A second alarm alerted the centre to a second death. Then a third. 'They're breaking through!' One of Cawl's colleagues broke protocol and spoke aloud.

'Three units destroyed! You will pay for their loss,' snarled Aspertia back. 'Maniples six and two, reinforce.'

Cawl grinned. Two was his maniple. He was one of Aspertia's best. He knew she wouldn't be able to keep him away from the action for long, no matter how angry she was with him.

The units under Cawl's command swooped out of the defence box at his urging, falling into a close arrow formation. They moved with perfect synchronicity, only a few metres apart. On his displays, icons flashed indicating where Aspertia wanted him to go, but Cawl had read the situation and was already on his way.

The shoal of xenotic lifeforms was ahead.

A gaseous bladder was their principle feature. The density of the atmosphere allowed a certain extravagance of form; these were not diaphanous creatures, but solid, well-armoured hunters.

Stable dathrates armoured the upper surfaces of the flight bladder and the multiple-jointed legs that trailed behind it. Underneath all that was a sagging mouth and several boneless nozzles that projected gas in a high-velocity stream, allowing the creatures to control their motion with remarkable efficiency. They surged about like darting birds even in the thousand-kilometre-an-hour winds of the planet.

Nobody knew what the things were, if they were intelligent or simply animals, or if they were native or alien to the world. The forge world's xeno-genetors itched to get hold of a specimen, but it had so far proved difficult. After they were killed most fell into the raging turmoil of the planet's interior. The rare specimens snagged by the scows had disintegrated during transit back to the stations. Their clathrate armour was hard enough to deflect autocannon rounds, but after death it destabilised rapidly, and the soft tissues quickly followed. They had no utility to the Imperium, so studying them was not a priority, and of interest only to xenos-obsessed eccentrics. The effort to gather a specimen distracted from the cloud mining. All the Trisolian Mechanicum required of the xenos was that they stay away or have the grace to die quickly, and so the xeno-genetors remained in ignorance of their mysteries.

The cloud creatures were far more nimble than the robots, and swiped at them with limbs that were brutal in defiance of their delicacy. Unit One of Maniple Nine lost a fan pod, and though its shepherd overrode its innate programming, took direct control and fired off the machine's void engines in an attempt to stabilise it, it went into a spin and plummeted into the roiling clouds.

Cawl watched his robots carefully as they drew firing lines on the nearest clutch of the xenos. Autocannon fire flaring with phosphor traced lines across the sky. The machines' limited brains could follow these ranging markers easily, and missiles quickly followed.

A creature rocked under the impact of Cawl's assault. Clathrate armour collapsed. A missile pierced soft flesh beneath and passed out of the other side before detonating in the air. The creature was mortally wounded and lost altitude, leaking a stream of bright gas from its breached shell.

'Do not allow them within the cordon,' said the domina in her multiple tongues. 'Plug the gap, hold the line.'

Cawl broke off his automata and swung them around before they got too close to the creatures. One of them lunged out from the swarm, a serrated blade on the end of its limb slicing down at his lead machine Cawl saw it coming, and made the robot dodge aside with a burst from its manoeuvring thrusters. At that distance, it took half a second for his commands to reach the machines. That was far too much lag. The creature's weapon missed his device by mere inches, then he was past. He got a quick view of the magnitude of the swarm. Thousands floated from the deeps, their crystalline armour glinting in the endless lightning.

'I recommend an immediate withdrawal,' Cawl stated, data-pulsing a pict capture of the rising swarm to his mistress. 'See what ascends, domina.'

Aspertia spared a picosecond of consideration. During that brief time she appraised the tactical situation herself, and performed an analysis of the extractors' progress.

<Negative,> she canted, so everyone could hear her dismissal of Cawl's suggestion. <We have not reached resource parity for this mission. Departing now would result in a net loss to the Mechanicum. Remain. Fight.>

Cawl once again intruded himself into the robots, boosting them back towards the fight. The situation was worsening by the second. Thousands of the creatures were attacking, picking off the extractors' defenders, getting closer to the larger machines pillaging their domain. Cawl had his maniple concentrate fire on the largest of the creatures, a monster fifty metres across. His autocannon shots blew chunks out of its armour. Multiple missile impacts detonated across its upper side. It was still advancing on the scows as he turned his robots again, and flew them to a safe distance. The Mechanicum didn't even know why these things swarmed the extractors. They didn't seem capable of eating either flesh or metal. It could have been purely territorial, of course. It didn't matter. They had to die.

Cawl sifted through the mass of data exloaded by his charges. The extractors were at seventy-four per cent capacity. Every dead automaton meant that number had to be higher. Battle was a game of economics; cut and run now, and they would be in resource deficit, but staying to even it up might worsen their losses.

Cawl was about to swing around for another pass when his forward augur display lit up with dozens of new contacts.

<More xenos, coming up from below. They're targeting the rearmost extractors.> He pulsed emotionlessly, like a machine, as befitted a man of his calling. His heart, however, pounded with adrenaline.

Aspertia ordered more of the robots to break formation and head off this new threat. The shifting polyhedron shrank closer to the extractor rafts. There was now fifty metres between the overlapping fields of fire of the automata and the outermost parts of the rafts, no more than that.

'This is going to be close,' muttered Cawl.

'Check your emotive responses,' whispered the tech-priest at the command desk next to Cawl's. 'You are modus unbecoming. You shame us all.'

'Shut up, Basken,' said Cawl.

Cawl's machines passed over the central scow. Flashing lights blinked warnings that he stay away. Screed and infographic told him the same story of exceeded proximity limits. He ignored them, overriding his robots' idiot impulse to obey the data shout, and he pushed them closer.

He had to get nearer.

Like the leviathan of ancient myth rising from the ocean, a gigantic specimen of the Trisolian xenos broke through the cloud by the lead extractor. Plumes of vapour and chilling gas cascaded from its dathrate shell. It was immense, two hundred metres across. A swarm of smaller examples accompanied it, waving their transparent, bladed limbs in the epitome of alien menace. The grav-waves of

the repulsor motors caught on the giant's shell, rocking the scow I dangerously. Cawl watched helplessly as an orange-suited adept flipped over the guardrails and went plummeting to his death.

<Ware below!> Cawl widecast, cutting through Aspertia Sigma-Sigma's dominance protocols to contact the raft directly, bringing a wave of electronic enmity from the domina. If she had a verbal rebuke to follow, he did not hear it.

His mind sped to lightning alacrity by his modified intelligence core, Cawl took in and assimilated all the data he could. His Vultaraxes' limited minds were preparing to unleash their weaponry in a standard suppression pattern at the giant, an action that would have as much effect as discharging a laspistol into the ground. Cawl summoned up a flickering succession of data overlays, settling on a sonar map showing pressure differentials in the creature's gas capillaries. They had no nervous or circulatory system as the Mechanicum understood it. They were attuned to the world they inhabited; violently tempered creatures of ice and gas.

Cawl slaved all his maniple's weapons to his own will. The targeting arrays for the three machines lay atop one another. This was the sort of thing a man needed a good intelligence core for, and Cawl's was superlative.

He selected pressure nodes within the beast, stripping the clathrate armour off with hammering volleys of autocannon fire. Cawl conducted an interlaced auspex sweep of the armour. It had cracked, no more. Cursing, he put all the machines' engines on full reverse burn. Engine pods rotated to the inverted position, and the Vultaraxes sped backwards. Cawl preferred to have his Vultarax speed by their targets on these guardian missions, out of range of the Trisolian xenos' shard claws, but there was no time.

Urgent ringing distracted him. The left engine of number two was burning hot. No time for that either.

He had the autocannons target the weakened armour sections. Smaller beasts came at his craft. They seemed to sense the weakness of number two, and they mobbed it clamping themselves to its armoured hull and thrashing at it with their limbs. The weight dragged at the machine pitilessly. The engine blew out, smoke presaging a flaring burst of flame. The machine's system alarms whooped as it pitched to the side and fell. Plaintive unpanicked pleas for aid bleated from its cybernetic cortex as it vanished into the boiling clouds.

Cawl ignored the streaming pressure and temperature indicators blinking at him as Automaton Two fell to its death. He concentrated on the island-sized beast which attacked the raft. Teeth grinding with the tension, he ignited the Vultaraxes' void jets and pushed them up to full burn. The semi-intelligent brains of the machines were reduced to passengers; he was in control. He jinked his robots through rushing mobs of the creatures, and swung them about once clear. As he

prepared them for another attack run, the giant beast wrapped water-clear arms around the scow. Claws of high-pressure ice sawed through the metal. Gas gathered so carefully erupted from crumpled containment coils. Men, cyborgs and automata fell from the pitching deck. Others hung from the rails, moments from death, or poked hopelessly at the leviathan assailing them with electro gaffs and attractor hooks.

Cawl banked his automata back around. A quick calculation told him he needed more firepower. He was faced with a stark choice. Either the men and the raft would be lost or he could do something about it, inevitably revealing his illicit upgrades.

He took a moment to consider. He would be found out eventually that was certain. And being found out under heroic circumstances would only serve his cause. But if he did what he was considering doing, then he would have put one foot firmly into the court of the Mechanicum's great game. There would be no hiding from then on.

His machines hung in the air, their usurped cortexes bridling at the lack of action. Through their eyes, Cawl saw robots and xenos engaged in aerial battle.

<Cawl! What are you doing?> demanded Hester Aspertia Sigma-Sigma. <Recommit to the skirmish, now!>

The scow shook in the arms of the xenos. Grav-repulsors broke, showering sparks into the clouds. He could not hear the screams of the crew, but he could imagine them. He could imagine their terror. It was now or never.

There was one factor that tipped Belisarius Cawl into acting.

He cared.

A thought deployed a high-grade dominance code into the operations centre, bringing all the automata into his direct command. His field of view sub-divided into multiple individual fields, crowded with status graphics around the edge. Cogitators and servitors alike rang out alarms at Cawl's invasion. The other tech-adepts were confused at first as their units slipped away from their oversight and their desks went dead, then angry when they realised who had done it.

'It's Cawl!' one blurted in a saw-like machine voice.

Cawl was aware of the chaos he had caused only on the periphery of his being. His machine-meshed consciousness was overfilled with the tricky business of coordinating three dozen somewhat recalcitrant war machines. Semi-organic minds squealed at him for higher-level access codes.

Cawl squashed them all.

He couldn't do this alone, not in his wildest fantasies. He was forced to rely on the machines themselves. Quickly he formulated an effective battle plan, overriding centuries of Cybernetica data custom in an instant.

Hands yanked at him, but he did not relent. He clung on to his seat as his colleagues attempted to drag him from his chair, and set up the machines in a whirling helix similar to the cavalier's caracole of ancient days. The helix rotated tightly, too quick for the xenos to snare, their autocannons trained on the weakened points of the alien creature's carapace, firing constantly.

Someone had him in an ineffective headlock. Fortunately for Cawl, tech-priests neglected their bodies. The band assailing him were as yet too lowly to possess much in the way of augmetic strength.

The automata continued their spiral of death, hammering the carapace of the xenos monster with their cannons. Ammo counters ticked to zero. Weapon barrels on the schematics blinked, indicating heat so great the barrels were near to failure. Cawl kept up.

'Stop!' shouted Aspertia. Cawl assumed she meant him, but the following data blurt went out to the others, <Unhand Cawl!>

'He's breaking the lore!' one shouted in anguish. 'He dishonours the machines!'

Weak fists pummelled him. Someone scrabbled at his hardline, trying to yank it out, scratching his skin around the input port. Cawl let go of his seat and backhanded his assailant hard, and the man lurched away with a yell, but the others grabbed his arm and pulled. The operation of so many automata at once was taking its toll on him. The displays cast into his mind blurred. His intelligence core ran hot. He feared it was slowly poaching his brain. <Stop!> canted Aspertia. Again the data blurt went to his fellows. <Unhand Cawl now!>

The assault ceased. His outraged colleagues stepped back. Dimly, Cawl heard the clank of fully augmented bodies surrounding him.

A skitarii rad pistol levelled itself at his temple. He could practically feel his gene-code degrading from the nearness of the barrel. Cancers birthed in his skin in that moment, he was sure, but he kept on with his task.

Cawl sent targeting information to the setheno-djinn in the robots' missile launchers. He had to trust them to do the rest. He was close to systems failure.

'Tell the Acquisitor Provost to order the extractors away,' he said thickly. 'Engines at full power.' He could barely speak. The heat in his head was unbearable. 'He has to move now!'

Simultaneously the havoc launchers on the machines spat out their loads of missiles. They popped from their tubes like celebratory fireworks. Dozens of closely spaced explosions engulfed the creature in fire. The dathrates were weakened just enough that the missiles punched through to the insubstantial flesh beneath, and detonated the gaseous physiology of the beast. It wallowed in the sky ablaze end to end, setting fire to dozens of the lesser creatures before it fell. With a gasp that brought him close to vomiting, Cawl severed his connection,

setting the automata loose to hunt down the remaining aliens under their own power.

He slumped over his desk. Displays flickered out. He had the horrible idea the burning he smelled was coming from inside his own skull.

Groggily, he lifted his head. Behind the two skitarii pointing their weapons at his head was a ring of horrified flesh and mechanical faces. Cawl grinned at them. There was blood in the back of his throat. He could taste it.

Aspertia Sigma-Sigma rattled forwards, sinuous and sinister, pushing her minions out of the way.

'Belisarius Cawl, tech acolytum rho grade, speak now or be destroyed. What you have done goes against all fifteen minor laws of the operations of robotics, and is open blasphemy against one of the major commandments of machine intelligence interface, to whit, thou shalt not presume to usurp the Machine-God in the programming of his most holy vessels.' She bent down. She was so long the movement brought her mirror mask to the side of his face.

'In short,' she hissed, directly into his ear. 'We do not reprogramme our automata on the fly, tech acolytum! Why did you do it? Your answer had better be sufficiently impressive, or I will perform the sentence of lobotomisation and internment in a servitor chassis myself, this instant.'

'Because… because…' Cawl said. The heat in his brain addled his thoughts. 'Because it was efficient,' he managed. 'And because I won.'

'Kill him!' said one of his colleagues. 'Kill him now for his transgression against the holy machine!'

The domina swivelled her mirror mask face to look upon the speaker. He cringed fearfully.

'That is not your decision to make, Hanlo Toe Zero-Nine. I will not deactivate this one.' She peered at Cawl for a long time. 'You and I are going to have a little talk, I think, Belisarius Cawl.'

Servomotors whirring, she reared up. 'Take him to the repair bay! Have him tended to, then deliver him to my quarters.'

By the time a pair of servitors came to drag him away, Cawl was unconscious.

SIX

The Fugitive King

'I cannot win,' said Leman Russ to himself. 'I cannot beat Horus.' The training cage he had commandeered was the size of an arena, with a sandy floor laid over an oval combat deck gridded with micropores to allow the escape of spilt blood, but not the sand. It was big enough for spectacle. Only the lack of seating made it a place to train rather than for theatre. Numbered doors concealed entryways to machine pits where combat servitors waited to be called. A gladiator of mythical Roma would have felt at home there.

There were no spectators or aides, no legionaries to spar with. By his order, Russ had been left alone with the machines and his thoughts.

'I cannot beat Horus,' he repeated to himself, 'but I must try.'

He circled a massive combat drone and smiled grimly with approval at its brutish might. Broad plasteel shoulders presented a fortress wall to the front. Its huge arms had the power to crush the life from a *hrossvalur*. That much metal looked sluggish, but it was not. An overcharged multi-fuel reactor sufficient to power a Dreadnought clung to the back. The machine's plasteel shell protected high-response fibre muscles and twitch-pistons. Scarring remained on the front from its last outing. The square fingers of its enormous hands were scraped with past violence meted out against its opponents. Buried deep inside was an adapted human brain sculpted for combat and programmed with every art of fighting practised by mankind. It was fast, it was deadly; it was the most powerful of all the combat servitors available in the Imperial Palace.

The machine was used by legionaries newly interred within Dreadnoughts to help adapt old skills to their new bodies. It was an unusual practice, instituted by Dorn for his warriors in the wake of Horus' betrayal. Russ thought it sound. During the Great Crusade, the Legions' Contemptors rarely met their match in xenos machines. Now Dreadnought versus Dreadnought combat was commonplace, it made sense to train for it. The machine's colours, hazard striping painted over the dull orange used on civilian heavy machinery, were all that separated the machine from a weapon of war.

Russ was small before it. Each of the hands could crush his skull. Its feet could grind him flat. He had ordered it brought out as it was the only combat drone

capable of giving him a challenge. It could kill him. He had decided to face it where none of his men could see and therefore object. This was his time.

'Activate training programme, maximum aggression,' Russ called out. Hidden machines heard his words and adjusted the programming of the drone. 'Disengage all failsafes. Allow killing strength.'

He walked up and down impatiently while the machines adjusted the drone. Russ carried a long spear in his hand that he twirled as he paced. Not *that* spear; that leaned against the wall, spectating. The part of Russ that hearkened to the Imperial Truth felt a little foolish bringing it there to see. The larger part, the Fenrisian native, felt the heavy hand of wyrd guiding him. If he examined his actions via that mode of thought, he hadn't brought the spear to watch; it had demanded to come. He had not chosen to practise with a similar weapon; something from outside had made him.

He spat on the ground, as much to clear his throat as ward off maleficarum. Or so he told himself.

He had been exercising for two hours. Fragments of his earlier foes remained on the sand. He had barely broken a sweat.

'I've warmed my muscles, machine!' he called. 'I'm ready for you!' Indicator lumens flickered inside the armour shell, making its innards glow.

Russ grunted a low, canine laugh, and readied himself for battle.

A crackle of vox preceded a machine's announcement.

<Combat Drone prepared. In-loading bespoke training programme, author Leman Russ, Sixth primarch. Failsafes zero. Killing strength active. Combat parameters unbound. Activating.>

The drone jerked as its reactor came online and flooded its motors with energy. It rose up as hydraulics pressurised and muscle bundles contracted. Its activation was clumsy, the rattling awakening of a broken-down machine. Then a shudder passed through it, and it transformed. Servos whined and clicked as it tested its weapons. Its engines purred. It became steady, radiating threat.

Russ smiled.

The machine moved. There was a moment of lumbering, ungainly acceleration that turned to fluid danger. It charged for the primarch. No hesitation. There was no weighing of an opponent that a living being might make. The machine could learn nothing from watching the primarch. It knew everything already.

Its torso pivoted, left arm raised. Orange, yellow and black blurred as it swung the fist at Russ.

Using the spear as a pole, Russ vaulted over the back of the giant servitor. Its fist connected solidly with the ground Russ had been occupying. The sand absorbed the impact. The machine pulled back, leaving a crater in the floor.

Russ jabbed at the drone's reactor. Power plants were a weakness in all fighting machines, including legionary battleplate. The drone's was well armoured. He thrust the spear tip at the slot of a vent, where mesh protected pipes and casings of a uniform, dirty oil-brown. The machine spun around on the ball mount at its waist, swatting the spear out of the way with one fist, the second following hard behind to aim at Russ' head. The primarch ducked, sweeping the spear at the machine's feet as they tracked round to match the changed direction of the torso. The shaft rang off chunky greaves, scraping a shallow groove into the metal. The machine stumbled a little at the force of the blow, but checked its fall and stepped resolutely at the primarch. Russ jabbed at its chest. The unpowered spear-point dinged into the plasteel, Russ' godlike strength knocking out a divot of metal. The machine rocked back on its heels, recovered again and powered on, swinging one fist after another in blurring arcs. Russ ducked one, and the second, attacking the machine with controlled jabs of his weapon in between. He was a graceful warrior. No movement was wasted.

He ducked and leapt the machine's swings until he saw an opening, and thrust the spear deep into a gap between two armour plates. Hot oil dribbled from the wound. The movement of the left arm roughened. But the spear was stuck fast, and before Russ could pull it out, the training Dreadnought swept its right hand down over its chest, snapping the weapon's haft.

Russ laughed, and threw himself at the machine. It raised its fists to deliver a double-handed blow, but he caught them and dug his heels into the training arena floor, and pushed hard. Sand banked up behind him. He slowed. Finding a natural point of balance between his own and the machine's strength, he pushed, and slowly he forced the training drone backwards over the sand. Its motors whined with the effort. Russ' veins stood out in his neck. He adjusted his grip, switched his footing, and with a shout forced the machine sideways.

His enormous strength bearing down on it forced it to bend its left knee. Teeth gritted, Russ kicked at the right, slamming his foot into the joint's side again and again, until it gave out with a wrench and a spray of oil, and the machine fell over to the floor.

Russ danced back, ready for the next assault.

'End programme,' said a voice.

Russ looked up. He was still alone, but the lenses of a hololithic projector set into the wall sparkled with white light and, into the air, painted an image of an old man leaning on a staff.

'Malcador,' said Russ. 'Where have you been hiding? I've had no word from you for a week.'

'I have not been hiding, Leman,' he said. *'You can beat a Dreadnought unarmed.'*

'I can. Easily.'

'You exaggerate.'

'A Fenrisian virtue,' said Russ.

'You put yourself at risk. This is reckless.'

'That is the point,' said Russ. 'I am making it hard for myself. Without armour or powered weapons it is a challenge to take down a machine like this. I need a challenge. I can beat this thing, but I cannot beat Horus, not yet. Dorn's right about that.'

'Lord Dorn is displeased by your choice,' said Malcador neutrally. Russ loved the regent, but he bridled at his tone. The old man liked to keep his statements short and his silences long, so that others might make fools of themselves in filling them. Normally it amused him to watch, but he didn't like the technique being used on him, and his humours were already out of balance.

'That doesn't work on me,' Russ said.

'What doesn't?' said Malcador. There was a touch of amusement to his words, and that annoyed Russ even more.

'Dorn knew what I intended. Does my decision disturb you as well, old man?' Russ snarled. 'Do you think I should stay here with the others? You don't understand me if you think I should. Wolves hunt - we don't hang back to guard our dens. You have your appointed task, I mine. Do not let me distract you from your duties.'

'I am not disturbed. Nor am I distracted. I helped you before. I have not changed my mind.'

'Then why come to speak with me?'

Malcador's image straightened up. *'Because I should, and because your father cannot,'* said Malcador. *'I have a little time. Attend me. You know where to find me. I will see you in an hour.'*

Malcador's hololith blinked out.

'How do you know I will come?' Russ said into the empty air.

He cocked his head, expecting a reply to his challenge. He didn't get one.

The telepath could as easily have spoken into his mind, or sent a ghostly projection of his body to the Wolf King. His psychic might was second only to that of the Emperor. Russ thought he was making a point by not using his abilities.

Growling softly to himself, Russ snatched up a towel and wiped himself down, then left the arena to get dressed.

A moment later, he returned and reluctantly collected the Emperor's Spear.

MALCADOR SAT IN his private garden overlooking an enclosed valley in the Himalazian peaks. Water tumbled from on high, running down a stream bed through a thick jungle of rhododendrons. Insects reconstructed from ancient

genetic records flitted between the blooms hanging from the trees. The air was thick and moist, rich with oxygen, redolent of the nectar of flowers and the healthy, pure smell of loam.

This was a vision of Old Earth, but it was a lie. The sky was roofed over with armourglass. The stream went into a tank, and

was pumped back up the mountainside and let loose to repeat its journey. It would never reach the infant reborn seas. The clean light came not from Terra's tired sun but from a compact fusion reactor suspended over the centre of the valley. The mountains that once soared boundless to the sky were covered by the buildings of the Imperial Palace.

In the years after his finding, Leman Russ had spent a lot of time at the Emperor's side. Among the many things the Emperor had told Russ were His plans to restore Terra to life. By the time of the Great Crusade's end He had already brought a few of its once extensive oceans back. But much of the rich life of Old Earth's past was extinct, and records that might allow its reconstruction destroyed. Even if they won, Russ doubted Terra could be remade again into the world it was. Now, even if the Imperium survived the war it would be wounded even further. So many pretty dreams had died on the sands of Isstvan V.

Malcador waited for him in the shaded arbour where, months before, Leman Russ had interviewed Garviel Loken. Like then, a *Hrafnkel* board was set up on the marble.

'I hope you give a better game than your Alpha Agent, Malcador.' Russ sat down opposite the aged psyker.

'Would you like to play?' said Malcador.

'You'll cheat.'

'I thought you wanted a challenge.'

'We're all playing this game now,' said Russ gruffly. 'The outnumbered king, besieged on all sides.'

'Which side do you want?' said Malcador.

'Go on then, I'll take white,' said Russ begrudgingly. 'I need the practice.'

The white pieces ringed the single king at the centre of the board. The aim was for the king to escape the larger dark army surrounding it. Russ picked up a warrior piece and moved it.

'Where have you been hiding? I've hardly seen you since I returned from Vanaheim,' said Russ. 'You made time for Sanguinius' arrival.'

'You were keen to go out and kill things. I was busy.' Malcador moved one of his own pieces.

Russ looked at the board and grunted. 'Looks like an interesting opening, but none of them are. You shouldn't read too much into the first few moves.' He moved the next of his pieces swiftly. 'I note many of my father's pieces are not on

the board at the moment. Where are the Custodes? Those ones you dredged up to guard the tower were the first I've seen for months.'

'With your father,' said Malcador.

'Ah,' said Russ, raising his eyebrows in an expression of mock understanding. 'With my father. And you will still not tell me what He is doing.'

'He is in the Imperial Dungeon.'

'That's where He is, not what He's doing, you sly orm. Don't try to fob me off. Will He not speak with me even now?' said Russ. 'He cannot,' said Malcador simply.

Russ bracketed one of the darker pieces with two of his white and took it. 'First blood. I shouldn't read anything into that either. A dead scout is not a war won.'

Malcador moved a piece. Russ tracked the movement with his eye closely. His post-human brain idly calculated the myriad possible following moves. Russ loved to play Hnefatafl, but it was too easy for him to win.

'*You're* a crafty old bastard, Malcador,' said Russ. He moved a piece, then lost one.

'You're enjoying this war.'

Russ glanced up from the board. 'Why do you say that?'

'You find life too easy. This war is not.'

'Get out of my head,' growled Russ.

'So you admit I am right.'

Russ moved a piece. 'There's nothing to admit, if you can look in here and read my mind.' He tapped his head with his fingertip so hard it locked.

'You are set on facing the Warmaster.' Malcador looked at him expectantly.

'Take your turn,' said Russ. Malcador moved a piece 'You know I am,' Russ continued. 'I'd been waiting for Loken and your band of lost souls to come back. I needed to know what had happened, that his mission was a success.'

'Was it?'

'You know that it was. Stop pretending,' said Russ. 'You know that I was always going to leave.'

'Your brothers are not happy.'

'They knew too. I haven't lied to anyone.'

'They need you,' said Malcador. He made a deliberate move.

'I thought you weren't going to try to convince me to stay.'

'I'm not,' said Malcador. 'But you've fought two successful campaigns since you returned. You have value here.'

Russ made a dismissive noise. 'All that parading around the segmentum edge? I had to do something to keep my mind busy, and stay away from Dorn's sanctimonious lecturing.'

'I thought you got on with Dorn.'

'We do get on. I respect him, hel, I like him, but he is a different man to me, and his methodology plucks at my nerves after so long a stay. Only Guilliman and Perturabo are more boring than he is.'

A rare smile crept across Malcador's thin lips. 'Do you know, I did tell your father to make you more personally compatible with each other. But He believed you all needed to be different to fit the tasks He had ordained for you, and that rivalry rather than blind affection would drive you to greater heights.'

'That worked, didn't it?' said Russ sourly. 'Sometimes I think the Emperor isn't half as clever as He thinks He is.'

'There are very few people who could say that safely, Leman,' warned Malcador. 'You might not be one of them.'

Russ paid no heed to his tone. 'Perhaps there should be more who are willing to say it. I sometimes think my father should have heeded you better,' said Russ. He took another piece. 'But I like the way I am, so perhaps I should be glad that He didn't. Even if He had, it wouldn't have made a damn bit of difference. He could have engineered us all to love each other and skip about holding hands like children, but it wouldn't have worked. I've seen brothers from mortal families stain their swords with each other's blood often enough over the most stupid of things. Nature and family made them to care, and they didn't. Not even He can predict everything.'

'He cannot,' agreed Malcador. He moved another piece. Russ took it.

'Try harder,' said Russ, and made his move.

'*You* cannot beat him, not like he is now,' said Malcador.

'Him being Horus.'

'Who else?'

Russ looked up again from under his glowering brow. 'You *are* trying to dissuade me. Stop it. Sanguinius is here, they need me less.'

'I'm not trying to do anything,' said Malcador calmly. 'But neither I nor the Emperor can see what will happen to you. I need to make sure you are not going to use yourself wastefully.'

'Is that from affection, Malcador, or don't you want to lose a useful weapon?'

'What do you think?'

Russ hunched lower. 'Both.' He tugged at his bottom lip and shook his head. 'I know I can't win.' He sat up. Though he looked down on Malcador from a considerable height advantage, his words were delivered from the heart, as a son seeking counsel from his father. His barbarian bluster fell away, stripped off like the leather masks his warriors wore, revealing the man beneath the beast. 'So I will have to find a way of beating him. You heard the Knights Errant's report. Horus is beyond the touch of mortal steel. On Fenris, the gothi turn the world spirit against the wights and ghosts. I am *forced* to do the same. I will travel

home, where my priests are powerful, and consult with them there. I suppose that's why you've called me, to give a warning or something.'

'Or something,' said Malcador. The regent took a tight, considered breath. 'I want you to listen to me, Leman, very carefully. You have always understood the virtue of restraint. You and the Khan both know the value of the warp but both of you have been alive to its dangers from the very beginning.'

'And Dorn called me a hypocrite for it,' said Russ.

'I was there.'

'Calling for the abolition of the Librarius, while surrounding myself with bone-waving priests.' Russ smiled, almost secretly. 'Maybe I am a hypocrite.'

'There have always been exceptions for you, Leman,' said Malcador.

Russ nodded. 'I know. Father has been generous to me.'

'Your purpose is singular, and He relies on you to perform it. So many of the others have been disappointments, first those we do not name, then Horus and the rest, but not you. He trusts you, Leman. I need to know I can too.'

Russ raised an eyebrow. He took his move without looking at the board.

'Dorn has a point. You should be careful. Do not abandon the restraint you have always shown. Do not let pride drive you on to embrace powers you cannot control.' Malcador shut his eyes, turning his vision inwards upon private vistas. His voice assumed the stem certainty of prophecy. 'In your eagerness to save your father and kill your brother, you will be tempted to turn the weapons of the enemy back on him. This mistake has snared men for millennia, and xenos and the great beings of distant times. There is a greater enemy behind Horus. Do not listen to its lies.' He opened his eyes, and smiled pleasantly. 'Still, l tear if you set yourself on this course YOU will destroy yourself Death will not come for you with flashing tangs, but slowly, through the poison of doubt. That is the power of the enemy we lace.'

Russ' face twisted. 'If father knew this foe was so dangerous, this *Chaos*, He should have told us about it. Then this whole sorry mess of a war would never have happened.'

'Tie kept it from you to protect you,' said Malcador. 'If He had told the truth, the outcome may well have been worse. More of your brothers may have been tempted to actively seek greater power. See what happened to Magnus.' Malcador took a move, placing a piece somewhere that seemed to give him no advantage whatsoever. Russ stared at him levelly.

'Well, you don't need to worry about me. Magnus did the sorcery, not I,' said Russ. He returned his attention to the game.

'Be sure it stays that way. You spoke to Dorn of limits. Make sure you remember them.'

Russ leaned on the table. 'Now why do you think I would forget where the lines lie, when my entire life I have sought them out, danced over them and back again to test them, but never strayed far beyond? *Ever*!

'Then you will not seek to turn the power of the warp against Horus?'

'In truth?' He shrugged. 'If I must, yes, though my gothi would fight me every step if I made that choice.'

Malcador looked at him concernedly. Russ growled.

'I will find a cleaner way, I swear.'

Russ moved his king into one of the ornate corner squares, neatly avoiding Malcador's pieces.

'The wolf evades the trap,' he said. Russ knocked over the king. It fell down with a soft clatter, rocking, before Malcador pinned it in place with his long forefinger.

'Remember when you face your brother, Leman, it is you who will be the fugitive king, not the Warmaster. Do not overestimate your own strength.'

'We're all trapped kings on your board, aren't we?' said Russ. 'I've always known that. I know what kind of man you are, Malcador.'

'Do my methods bother you?' asked the regent, genuinely curious.

'No,' said Russ. 'Nothing bothers me. The world is as the world is. There's nothing a man can do about his wyrd.'

Malcador set the king upright away from the board. He cut a lonely figure on the table, isolated from his warriors.

Malcador and Russ looked at each other for a long time. There was a bond between them neither had ever truly acknowledged. Russ remembered when he had first come to Terra. He had spent more time with Malcador than with the Emperor to begin with. In a sense, he was overly blessed with distracted fathers.

Russ glanced back at the Hnefatafl board. There were numerous traps set all around the periphery. Malcador had left him exactly one way out.

Have you been preparing me for this all along? Did you know? thought Russ, which in Malcador's presence was as good as shouting it out loud.

Malcador's face twitched with amusement. Russ responded with a little smile.

'Thanks for the game, old man,' Russ said. 'I'll see you when I return.'

Russ got up and placed a fond hand on the regent's shoulder, before leaving Malcador in the garden.

Malcador watched the Lord of Winter and War leave. His gaze returned to the king, standing apart from his army, and from there to the spear Leman Russ had left behind, propped up against the wall.

SEVEN

Leaving Terra

The near space of Terra was crawling with ship activity.

Mechanicum scavenger barques swarmed a metal landscape wrought from steel and hung in orbit. The orbital plate still looked like a living world. Lights shone from domes and armourglass blisters. Peripheral signal beacons blinked. Spires shone with data sign.

The carrion vessels said otherwise.

Lemurya was dying. A conjurer's trick of a world, balanced on the knife edge dividing Terra's gravity from the freedom of space, Lemurya was a marvel of science; its renovation had been a statement of mankind's new ascendancy that shone brightly in the glare of Sol. Like a heliograph it had winked the message of Unity and prosperity at a hostile universe. Within its arcades and mega halls were soft landscapes for a civilised people. The playgrounds of the rich had been a promise of what might come for all mankind's teeming billions once the war was done and the galaxy under humanity's rightful stewardship.

No more. After thousands of years, its end had come, and not

at the hand of any enemy. Lord Dorn had declared the great civilian platforms a liability. Every one was in the process of being disassembled. Those in the highest orbits were towed away to be reassembled in the wake of victory, if victory ever came. The smallest were repositioned, converted to the purpose of war, and their populations pressed into service to man gun-decks built over the parks and the palaces. The very largest could not be moved, and were too dangerous to be left in place. Lemurya, Rodinia and the rest were torn from the sky; prophylactic destruction to prevent the traitors hurling them down to break on the world below.

Metal continents died, killed by their masters to save them from conquest.

Leman Russ' face reflected in the windows of the loading dock. Eyes of such a piercing blue they should surely be able to bore their way through the armourglass stared at the act of self-destruction unfolding in the skies below. The functional steelwork of the loading dock extended for kilometres either side of Russ. It possessed nothing so fancy as an observation deck. The window Russ watched from was one of only a handful that pierced the orbital's side. It was small, stretching from the level of a man's waist to just over human head height,

meaning the primarch had to stoop to peer out. Grubby with accreted dust, cracked by orbital debris impact, the window was a lone weakness in a wall of adamant. Either side of the primarch long corridors of latticed plasteel led to cavernous hold spaces. From within, autoloaders rumbled without pause, the transfer of mass from dock to ships shaking the superstructure. Shadowy cubic shapes thundered back and forth across the way, relentless as pistons as they ferried munitions, water, food, guns and all the rest of the endless materiel a fleet needed to wage war. Grilles left the orbital's coiled innards open to view, a mess of cables crudely bound by steel bands, hissing pipes, junction boxes, winking lights and ribbed metal organs crenellated like miniature cashes. The grim cybernetic skull of the machina opus glared from every surface. It was an ugly place - brutish, utilitarian, made for the provisioning of battleships - but it would survive Dorn's clearing of the heavens. It had a military application. The glorious skylands did not. There was no room for beauty or comfort on Terra anymore. Anything that did not serve the needs of war was swept away.

Over Lemurya the barques performed their positional dance, lining up with mechanical precision along the lateral and vertical lines of the plate, forming a cross that sectioned it into four quarters. Barrel-shaped tug craft puttered into position around Lemurya's periphery. Fire flashed as tow cannons spat tether harpoons, invisible even to the Wolf King's eyes at that far remove. Glittering storms of metal puffed out from the impact sites. Cables hundreds of metres thick-gleamed like spider silk in the morning.

From the barques came a coordinated twinkling.

Halting metal steps trembled the companionway. The careful placing of a staff upon the plating's open plasteel grid tapped softly.

'Jarl.'

'Kva,' said Russ without looking to see. 'Quiet now. I am thinking.'

'Lord Valdor has come to speak with you.'

'Has he now? He picks his moments, that one.'

'He is in haste, my king.'

'Well, he can wait!' growled Russ. 'He kept me waiting long enough, coming to me now, before I leave. Where was he six months ago? I want to see this.' Russ looked back at his adviser and beckoned. 'Come look. Come see the killing of Uppland.'

Kva's distinctive footsteps came to the Great Wolfs side. The reflection of his face appeared next to Russ'. He wore no helm or mask, showing his wasted features as openly as he did his Rune Priest's fetishes.

'My father wanted to bring the glories of the Oververse to everyone,' said Russ. 'I am watching how that turned out.' The barques withdrew at speed, scattering in insect clouds.

'Now see,' Russ said.

A yellow cross of molten metal flared into life across the vastness of the plate in fusion-born crucifixion. Tug engines fired. With the patience of glaciers, they drew the sectioned plate apart. Flecks and fragments spun away from the divides, tumbling into Terra's gravity well, filling the atmosphere with campfire sparks. Anti-aircraft fire rose up to destroy the most dangerous.

'I cannot disagree with this demolition,' said the Wolf quietly. 'Many times I have seen such artificial satellites plunge into the worlds they orbited. The impact upon the surface is more devastating than any bomb. It is the Oververse crashing down at the fall of the gods, the death of all things. The ending of times. I see this, and know the dream is over. A dream of paradise tom from the sky.'

'It is not the Oververse,' said Kva. 'The afterlife cannot be remade in the here and now.'

Russ gave Kva a killing look, his lip curled over pointed teeth. 'Don't be so bloody literal. It doesn't suit you. I am in a poetic mood, He-Who-is-Divided,' said Russ, his words grumbling in his chest as deep as any predator's growl. 'Permit me that before I leave my father's world forever.'

The barques returned. Their prior organisation seemed gone. They attacked the plate's quadrants in a feeding frenzy.

'*Mussveli* feasting on a hrossvalur's wave-washed corpse-bloat,' said Russ, slipping into the skjald's meter, 'turn the sea-road bloody, and draw feller things to the flesh-feast.'

'Worse monsters come already,' said Kva.

Russ and Kva watched the barques shred Lemurya to pieces and carry off morsels of metal to feed to the salvator arcs that commanded them. Such ships were the ravens of the star-sea, harbingers of doom, battlefield scavengers of the void. They were many. They worked fast, but the plate was huge, wide as a moon. They were gnats attempting to drain the sea in sips.

'This will take weeks,' murmured Russ. 'They do not have enough time. Dorn fortified the system years ago. Why did he leave this until now?'

'It is something to do,' said Kva. 'Your brother needs occupation.' Russ shrugged. 'Maybe.'

All around Lemurya, the process was repeated as Terra's floating continents were tom down. Rodinia's outer rings had been broken off several days ago, the hub boosted to higher orbit for dissection. Gondavana had already been divided up and carted off. High Alba and Up-Brasyl bled pearls of light to the surface and back, lines of craft evacuating their populations while Mechanicum demolition crawlers scuttled over their surfaces, preparing them for dismantling.

Piece by piece, Terra was stripped of her metal garments, leaving her aged body shivering nakedly in the coldness of space.

Rumbling a thunderous growl, Russ tore himself away from the view of Terra's impoverishment.

'Send Valdor in, then. Let us hear what he has to say for himself. I'll wager a holdfast's worth of mjod he's come to warn me too. People seem to enjoy that. Warning me. Terra is a hall full of crones, washing their hands with their tears.'

Kva shrugged.

There were many doors into the gallery. By the nearest stood Kva's twin guardians, armoured in bone-white plate covered in protective runes and wolf talismans.

One squeezed his way through the door. Its dimensions suited menials bred to low gravity, not legionaries, yet he moved with utmost stealth and his plate touched not one part of the doorway.

A moment later Valdor emerged with difficulty, the golden plates of his armour clashing off the sides.

'My Lord Russ,' said Valdor.

'You don't look happy,' said the Wolf King. A touch of dangerous humour entered his eyes, the glitter of cold on a helfrost blade. 'If I were honest, I would say I enjoy your discomfort. If you hadn't left us after Prospero we might not have been boxed into that *skjitna* nebula.'

Valdor joined the primarch and glanced out of the window. His armour was pristine, scented with recently applied sanctifying oils, but his stolid face was pale, as if he had seen too little natural light and his attempts to hide his tiredness were unsuccessful.

'If I were a more insolent man, I would have to ask why you have chosen this benighted spot to skulk in,' Valdor said.

'Skulk, is it?' said Russ.

'If I were a more insolent man,' said Valdor.

'I'm here because I wanted to be left alone,' said Russ affably. 'I didn't do very well at that.'

'You've been asking to see me.'

'*Then* I was asking to see you, when I was on Terra. Now I am leaving. What good does it do me to see you now?'

'I am sorry my lord, the state of the war—'

'You can make up for it by telling me where you have been,' said Russ, 'and why my father is not speaking to me.'

Valdor looked pained. Russ folded his arms. The amusement went from his eyes, just like that, quicker than light from a doused lamp.

'Forgive the Great Wolf, he is of an ill humour today,' murmured Kva.

'I'll let my manner speak for me, Kva.' Russ seemed to swell in size. He took no more space physically, yet at the same time he became huge in the minds of

the men in the deserted corridor. His presence hung like a weight over them all, an executioner's axe suspended at the apex of its swing an instant from descent, or the hot wet snuffle of a bear at the cave mouth. He was fear. He was death behind a smiling face. It took more than courage to hold firm against such terror.

Valdor at least had the grace to look uncomfortable. 'My lord, I cannot tell you. We have standing orders from the Emperor Himself not to speak of what we do. Your father is occupied. Surely I Malcador told you that.'

'Aye, and I thought I might get a straighter answer from you than I Malcador. At the best of times his tongue is split. Dorn won't tell I me either, and he does know.' Russ sniffed at Valdor. 'You've been I fighting. That much I can tell. All of you. I've not seen more than a I dozen Custodes in the Palace together at any time since I got back.

'Where is the battle? You are exhausted.'

'I cannot say, my lord,' said Valdor. 'I apologise.'

'Then at least let me know if you are winning.'

Valdor stared up at him in silence.

'Fine then.' Russ shrugged mightily. 'I do not care. We both go I where the Emperor wills.'

'And him, is he what the Emperor wills?' asked Valdor.

'Are you talking about Kva here?' said Russ.

'You know I am.' Valdor eyed Kva's fetish-draped armour.

'Are you calling me a hypocrite too, Valdor?' Russ loomed dangerously. 'I've had enough of that from Dorn.'

'I would not live if I did,' said Valdor. His stony face did not so I much as twitch. 'I am simply pointing out an inconsistency in your I application of the Nikaean Edict. You were one of its most vocal I supporters. Sorcery, I believe you called it. Can you not see that I arrogance brought Horus down, and hubris Magnus? You exhibit both, my lord.'

'Careful,' rumbled Russ.

Kva spoke up in his own defence.

'Captain-general. We are at war with the Emperor's favoured son.

'He has boltguns, we have boltguns. He has void ships. We have void ships. We have Titans and cybernetica legions, fighter craft and Legiones Astartes. So does he. We have everything he has, and he has everything we have, apart from one weapon. A deadly weapon.' Kva tapped Valdor's engraved nameplate with the head of his staff. Bone trinkets jangled. 'Horus has magic. Real magic, drawn from the corrupt wellsprings of the Underverse. He has drunk deeply from black waters, its powers flow through his veins. We have the Emperor, but He is occupied. You did say this, did you not?' said Kva. 'He cannot be everywhere, as

powerful and all-knowing as the Allfather is. Otherwise, why would He need His sons? Why would He need you?'

'Some would say you are a witch,' said Valdor.

'By that definition, so is Malcador, so is the Allfather. So are all those gifted men and women you use in this war against the foe. They are all witches, but you do not fear them. You use them. They are not the only ones to draw upon the powers of the Underverse without malice.'

'The Emperor vouchsafes the purity of their gifts. They are watched. You are not.'

Kva laughed. 'There is no purity in this power. All of it is touched by corruption. But a man's heart, or a world's, that can be pure. We Rune Priests know when to stop. Our gifts are formed from the ice and heat of Fenris' world forge. We know not to venture beyond these bounds.'

'So you know restraint?' said Valdor. 'You know better than the Emperor?'

'I trust these men,' said Russ. 'We are the executioners of the Emperor. Our ways of life and war are defined by knowing the limits, and punishing those who exceed them.'

'You didn't bring your priests to the surface,' pointed out Valdor.

'The Great Wolf is headstrong some days,' said Kva, 'but he isn't a fool.'

Russ grunted at Kva in acknowledgement.

'This conversation will go nowhere, Constantin. So tell me, have you come to drag me back down to the surface and denounce me in front of my father, wherever He is, or are you going to let me get on with the business of killing my brother? It's high time someone did.'

'I want you to think, my lord,' said Valdor.

'Who says I don't?' said Russ. He leaned down so that he was eye to eye with Valdor, and bared his pointed teeth in a feral grin. 'I'm a thinker, me. I'm known for it.'

'Yes, you are,' said Valdor without mockery. 'I have seen that fine mind of yours in action. Please remember, my lord, that Horus will not be fooled by your barbarian facade.'

Russ stood straight. 'I don't expect him to be. Now, tell me what you're here for and get on your way. I'm busy.'

'Your father sends His regrets that He cannot be here,' said Valdor. 'He wishes you well in your endeavour.'

'He sent you to tell me that? Ha!' Russ clapped his hands. 'A vox blurt would have been as kind. It is well that I am an even-tempered fellow, or I might be insulted by this afterthought. Tell Him if He wants to be useful to me, He can say all that to Rogal - the man's as yellow as his sons' armour with choler.'

'I assure you, you are foremost in your father's thoughts. You all are.'

'That isn't making it better, Valdor. Why are you really here?'

'I came to make sure you got this.'

By vox, Valdor summoned a pair of menials. They pushed a grav-sled lined with purple velvet cushioning awkwardly through the narrow door. Upon it was a long-hafted spear made for a primarch.

'The Emperor's Spear. You left it at Malcador's retreat.'

At the sight of the weapon Russ sighed. 'My thanks,' he said. He left it upon its cushion. Leaving it on Terra was his last test for it. This was wyrd in action.

'You are welcome, my lord. I shall leave you to your peace.'

'You mean my skulking?' said Russ.

'If you wish.' Valdor gestured to the menials that they should go. They bowed to the primarch and left, the unease at the Lord of Winter and War evident in the speed of their departure. Valdor made to leave.

'Valdor,' said Russ.

'My lord?'

'I have to do this. You understand. It is what I am. It is what I was made for.'

Valdor bowed his head, and departed.

'He is right, Kva,' said Russ. 'They're all right. One day soon we will have to examine our relationship with the warp.' He purposefully avoided the *Juvjk* word Underverse and used the Imperial term. Still he spat upon the deck to ward away ill spirits.

'Yes, my jarl,' said Kva. 'But not today.' He paused. 'I have word from the *Hrafnkel*. Loading is complete. The fleet is ready to leave. We wait upon your word.'

Russ grunted. With the captain-general gone, he returned his attention to the silent play of destruction taking place over Terra.

'The prelude to the symphony,' Russ said.

'Aye,' said Kva. 'The loudest music is yet to play.'

As the warp storms calmed further, more ships came to Terra. Some came to lend their strength to a final defence. Many came half expecting the Throneworld to have fallen and to find themselves in a battle for their lives. The celebrations they held when they discovered the situation was otherwise were muted, for the actual state of the galaxy was little better than the worst of their fears. All of them brought stories of terrible trips through the warp, of men lost to madness, and ships clawed from the empyrean by nightmarish horrors.

Still they came. Ten thousand ships crammed the higher orbits. Hundreds of Collegia Titanica coffin ships and all their vessels of support waited at I the uppermost anchors. Their numbers were exceeded by Imperial I Army bulk carriers, many hurrying in from the galactic west and I those other parts of the Imperium that had been spared the worst I of the fighting.

Regiments from systems thousands of light years from traitor atrocity waited alongside the battered remnants of routed forces. Every day saw dozens more vessels coming in to Terra. If they expected I refuge and peace, they were disappointed. At the behests of the solar marshals they were ordered to make ready for war again.

Legion ships of the VII, IX and V resupplied in anticipation of the coming battle. They were given priority at the great docks around Terra, Jupiter, Saturn and Luna. Bereft of Mars' industrial might, Terra struggled to meet their demands. The vessels and their armies were ordered to make sail for this battle or that holdfast, hoping for resupply en route.

Most were ordered to Beta-Garmon.

Though many times greater than the expedition fleets, the Beta-Garmon armada was a ragged memory of the indomitable Principia Imperialis that had cleansed the stars during the early stages of the Great Crusade. Only two centuries had passed since those days; already they seemed unimaginably distant.

If there was any comfort to be had, it came from the knowledge that the gathering at Terra was but a foretaste of the Great Muster Lord Dorn had planned at Beta-Garmon. The generals and admirals focused their efforts on taking and reinforcing the contested system. Never mind that rumours of the Warmaster's victories had them doubting their chances of success. Never mind that, should Beta-Garmon fall, the way to Terra would be open. There was no space for fear. Extinction was the only alternative to victory.

The cessation of the Ruinstorm should have brought hope, but it fired a feverish preparation for the worst. Every man in the system, from the lowest menial to the primarchs themselves knew that the final days of the war were coming.

Soon, the most terrible conflict mankind had ever fought would be won or lost.

Through the shoaling press of ships around Terra, mighty predators sailed. Their steel-grey livery, adorned with snarling wolfs heads, their decoration was simultaneously intricate and primitive. The ships of the Space Wolves slunk obliquely away from the main marshalling nexuses. The capital ships, the *Niddhoggur*, *Fenrysavar*, and *Russvangum* were the core of the fleet, the alpha mothers and fathers of the pack. Around them sailed a few dozen lesser ships, ranging in size from grand cruisers to small, swift torpedo boats.

Then there was the *Hrafnkel*, Leman Russ' grand flagship. The others were the lords of the star packs; *Hrafnkel* was their god. Battered grey cliffs of plasteel slid past the other vessels with the stately presence of an iceberg afloat on Terra's prehistoric seas. Once the possessor of a whole lesser fleet's worth of firepower, the injured wolf had had many of its teeth pulled. Gaping holes marked every surface. Where its grey livery was not scarred black it was pocked with damage

not a hundred years in dry dock could erase. Wounds that deep should have seen it retired from front line duties. But it moved away from the safety of high anchor, its prow intent on ploughing fields of stars again.

The *Hrafnkel* and its mates moved like wolves through herds gathering after a hard winter. They were battered by their experiences, but alive, their pack coherent and still dangerous despite their injuries.

Astropathic messages radiated out from the Throneworld by the thousand. Broadcast spires made silent by the Ruinstorm sang again. So many went uncertainly, flung out to worlds that may not exist anymore.

No messages came for Leman Russ as he withdrew his Legion. Forty thousand Space Wolves left the Solar System, all that were left in all the Imperium. Prospero had been the grave of many. Alaxxes took thousands to the grasp of Morkai's jaws. More had bled into the unforgiving earth of Vanaheim, or floated frozen in their battle suits amid the voidal wreckage zones of Daverant.

The VI were a diminished force in every way. Even so, they remained potent enough to turn the tide of any battle. Dorn had made no secret that he would prefer that battle to be at Beta-Garmon.

The Praetorian's last orders to the Wolf had turned to pleas. All went unanswered.

Bypassing the Martian blockade, the fleet of the Rout flew with all engines burning to the edge of the Solar System, and to the jump point there.

EIGHT

The Domina's Guest

Cawl came around with a headache so pronounced he seriously considered replacing the whole of his brain with an augmetic. The inside of his head felt scorched, a sensation he had not thought possible before experiencing it. His brain throbbed with the painful insistency of a scalded hand. His skull felt like an eggshell. He avoided moving for some time for fear it would break, and spill the matter that housed his soul over the table.

He could not move much anyway. Metal straps at his ankles, waist, throat and wrists pinned him in place to a slatted interrogation bench held at twenty degrees off the vertical. His mind had its own fetters. Warding codes kept him from interacting with machinery. Each attempt to reach out was met by a wall of screeching binaric that did nothing for his pain. But his eyes were uncovered, and he could look around freely.

The table was in a large room made small by clutter. Red light gave it a sanguinary, arboreal air, like a forest floor at sunset. Bunches of cabling hung down from the ceiling in liana-like profusion. Banks of machines lined every wall and more stood in badly placed islands like the trunks of giant trees.

Walls of dials ticked with metronomic regularity. Cogitators on down time burbled self-diagnostic cant and made smug pronouncements as to their optimal functioning. A metre away from Cawl was a trio of servitors who oversaw the running of the room. He recognised the type. Only the brains were required for the task, but for whatever macabre reason their bodies had not been pruned back fully. They were heads, mounted like trophies on the wall, and even retained their faces as coverings of dead grey skin over their skulls. From neck caps their spinal columns and the disembodied remnants of circulatory systems plunged, rootlike, into glass cylinders of nutrient fluid.

More cables ran over the floor in dangerous, foot-snagging twists, furthering the illusion of an electric forest. Beyond Cawl's immediate vicinity, the chamber opened up into an octagonal shaft. He supposed he must be in the private chambers of Domina Hester Aspertia Sigma-Sigma. The domicile was more machine shop than home, a garage for a mechanism that owed nothing to humanity. It therefore had little in the way of material comfort, but the shaft was dominated by a vast articulated cradle within which Cawl assumed the domina

rested and was serviced when she wasn't scuttling around the connected stations of the Heptaligon. Only that detail made his location clear to him. He could otherwise have been anywhere.

He was left alone for an age. One hour, twenty-two minutes, three seconds, according to this internal chronograph, though on the human scale it felt a lot longer than that. He was alone, unconnected from the noosphere. Without the constant background chatter of machinery and conjoined souls that made up the hinterlands of a tech-priest's consciousness, Cawl was left isolated and alone. It was cruel.

Belisarius Cawl - Tech-Acolytum. He was therefore defiant when the domina finally came to interrogate him.

She rushed into the room like a metal wind, sure-footedly evading all the many hazards her poor maintenance practices created. Her mechapeds made a menacing clatter on the harder parts of the floor. When they encountered softer ground, it was more sinister still, a padding rustling with predatory overtones. The relict animal parts of Cawl's brain filled him with terrors of fangs and multi-limbed things hurrying over leaf litter.

She arrived over him, and her immobile, silver face seemed to wear a mocking smile. The flasks swinging from her chest clacked together. In the privacy of her rooms, she did not bother to cover them with her robes, giving Cawl an unwelcome sensation of intimacy.

'I have reviewed your service records,' she said. 'You are old for a tech acolytum, of the age that suggests one of three possibilities - lack of enthusiasm, incompetence, or guile. It can't be the first, or you would not have bothered to learn what you evidently have. It can't be the second, or you would not have been able to do it. Logic dictates that it is the third.' A run of floating text scrolled through the air, displaying Cawl's gene-code, upgrade serials, images, preferences, psychological profile and other, precious secrets. 'Mars, Ryza, Antioc, Belacane, Verica VII, Trisolian,' she said. 'Six forge worlds in nineteen years. You have delayed promotion to a higher rank, although your command of the mysteries entitles you to a grade four above the one you possess. In each world, you have had many masters. I am your third dominus here. Did you plunder all their knowledge before moving on, I wonder? You have mine, I know,' she said with quiet menace. 'How have you managed to move so freely?'

The war, Cawl did not say, and before that, the Great Crusade. Adepts travelled all over the galaxy on missions to recover old data, unlock the secrets of xenos technologies before condemning them to the pyre, minister to the machines of the colony fleets, build the

technical infrastructures of conquered worlds, and a million other things. Personnel were always in short supply, and Cawl was very good at ingratiating

himself. It had been remarkably easy to move about.

He kept his silence about all that. Aspertia waited patiently for him to speak. He stared back dumbly at her mirror mask.

'So that is the way you want to go. Your choice, tech acolytum.' Metal tendrils pushed themselves from the table, infiltrating his data and utility sockets. Their cold invasion made him tense.

She leaned down, and asked her first question.

'Cawl, what am I to do with you?' she said.

'Let me go?' said Cawl.

'Do not be glib with me,' she warned.

A burst of agonising electrical force rushed through his nervous systems, both native and grafted. A high current like that, so many delicate connections, so much electronic arcanery nestled within flesh…

It hurt a lot.

Cawl screamed. Aspertia shut it off.

'You have been caught in the crime of unsanctified modification. To break with ritual is to break with faith!' she scolded him. 'Remember the Sixteenth Lore.'

'I think of little else, domina,' said Cawl.

A second, painful jolt of electricity passed through his body, stinging hardest where metal met flesh.

'Let the Motive Force castigate the heretek and the experimenter,' she said emotionlessly. 'I shall assess the full extent of your blasphemies.'

A green, vector line holograph of his modified intelligence core popped into being. She swung her mirrored face to look upon it. 'You have been a very, very wayward boy,' she said. 'And yet there is artistry here. There is intellect. But do you have understanding? Do you comprehend the things you have done to yourself?'

Cawl fought through the after-effects of the shock to nod his head. 'Of course I do,' he said angrily. 'Else how could I have done it?'

Another mind-flaying burst of power seared through him. His jaws clenched. Had his tongue been in the wrong place, he would have bitten through it.

While he spasmed upon the table, Aspertia Sigma-Sigma held up one of her many clawed, mechanical hands and turned it around. Haptic interfaces embedded in her metal fingers rotated the image of Cawl's heretekal device.

'How did you come by this knowledge? From which data cache did you steal it?'

Cawl could not reply. She glanced at him disinterestedly - she was far more interested in Cawl's work than the individual named Cawl - and disengaged the electrical pulse.

'I didn't steal it!' spat Cawl. A rope of milky phlegm hung from the corner of his mouth. 'I worked it out myself.'

She gave him a long, hard look. 'This work is original?' Her electronic voice was weirdly modulated.

He nodded. There was no point in denying it.

'Your crime is far worse than I expected. You have contravened the Law of Divine Complexity,' she said. 'Improving that which, by its nature as knowledge gifted from the Machine-God, is unimprovable.' She shook her head slowly, with great and deliberate menace. 'Do you realise I could have you dropped in cleansing acid for this?' She looked at the graphic again. 'Why did you expose yourself by commandeering the automata?'

'I could have just let the extractor crew die,' said Cawl. 'But I've always had an irksome heroic streak.'

'If I said you perform unholy acts and should be destroyed, what would you say?'

'I would say you are wrong.' In his frustration he tugged hard at his straps. 'I have done nothing wrong! I seek knowledge, and through it travel the path of the lore. Intellect to understanding to comprehension! I honour the Machine-God in all I do. I want to ascend the mysteries like any other person of our creed. The Quest for Knowledge is all that matters in the universe.'

'But you perform experiments on yourself,' she said. 'Without consolation with the ancient teachings and without full understanding. This sort of work should only be undertaken after you have absorbed the knowledge necessary from the existing sources, and then only with sanction from your betters. How can you have the temerity to reinvent what is already known?'

'It is because it is already known that I knew I could work it out.' he snarled.

'You presume to be as good as the sages of the holy Age of Technology? A poor answer,' she said. She sounded almost regretful. 'No!' shrieked Cawl. Another bolt of power burned through him. 'This sort of cybermancy is above your position. You are not entitled to engage with these mysteries.'

'There are many paths to knowledge,' panted Cawl. His heart palpitated worryingly. Muscles clenched and unclenched randomly inside him. He was in danger of soiling himself. When he looked inside his mind, his supplemental mind's eye display was a wall of aching static. 'Experimentation is one of them. I have done nothing against the Machine-God.'

'Many would disagree,' said Hester Aspertia Sigma-Sigma. 'Most would say your actions are the basest form of heresy. You presume knowledge you do not have. You assume the wisdom of the ancients when you have no right. And yet…'

Cawl screwed his eyes shut in anticipation of another bursa of pain.

None came. He opened his eyes Aspertia was pondering the alterations to his intelligence core. 'There is genius in this work ergo, there is genius in *you*.' He let out an involuntary gasp, perhaps of relief, perhaps of fear unrealised. He was afraid, he wasn't ashamed to admit that.

'Really?' he said, more to delay the next jolt of pain than any other reason.

'Careful, Cawl,' warned the domina, wagging a metallic claw at him. 'Genius is rare, but genius is still only sentience, the third level of the mysteries. You have much yet to learn.'

'Learning is all I have ever striven to do.'

She withdrew and performed movements outside Cawl's sightline. The probes detached themselves from Cawl's limbs with so many metallic rasps, like mechanical leeches sated with knowledge and done with their feeding.

The restraints followed, unclasping and beeping out deactivations. The domina muttered prayers for proper function as she released her prisoner.

Cawl waited a moment before cautiously sitting. He felt disassociated from himself, and feared permanent damage either from his commandeering of the automata squadron or the punishment meted out by the domina, if not both.

She twisted around ganglionic bundles of dangling cables, sure as a serpent in its burrow amid the tree roots. Big as she was, the room was large enough to hide her bulk from Cawl.

'What will become of me?' he called out.

'Of you?' she replied, her voice emanating from a vox-projector in the wall over the display of twitching gauges. She returned a moment later clasping a bundle to the canisters hanging from her front. 'I will let you live, on sufferance. You will serve me directly from now on as an officer of the Taghmata. You may continue your work. Indeed, I expect it.'

'You do?' he said.

'You said that there are many paths to knowledge, Belisarius Cawl,' she said. 'Why should we neglect any route, as long as it leads to enlightenment? The means do not matter. It is the end result, the comprehension of the Machine-God's purpose. That is the goal,'

'You agree with me?' Cawl said in amazement. His hand dropped from massaging his wrist, his pain quite forgotten.

'You might say that. I shall remain quiet on the matter. From this day forth, anything you discover, you will inform me of immediately. What you know, I will know.'

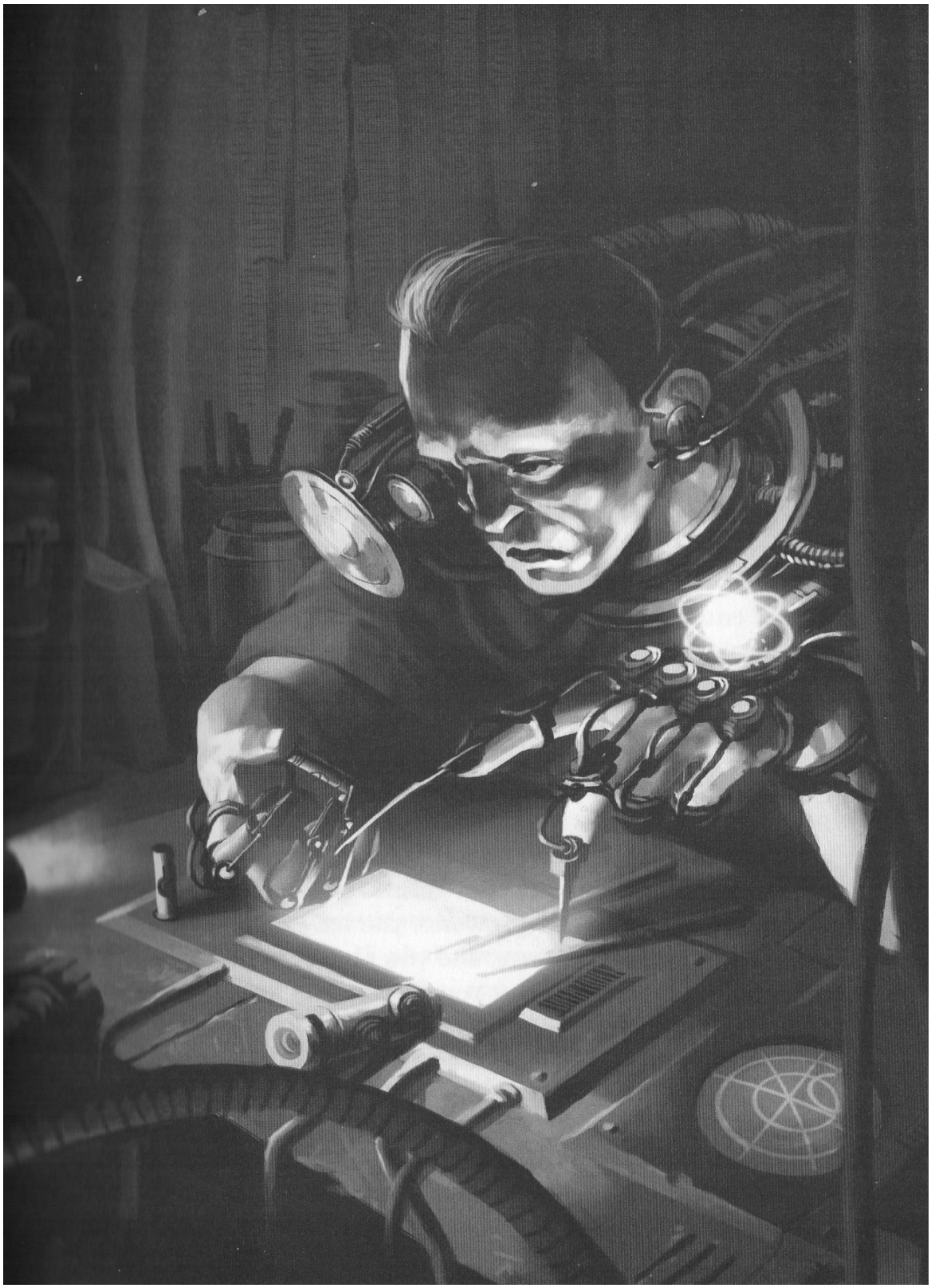
'Knowledge is the price for my life,' he said glumly.

She threw the bundle at Cawl. He caught it. Inside a plastek wrapper was a tech-priest's robes, embroidered with the domina's symbology and badges of a permanent member of the Mechanicum's military.

'If you had spent a little more time safeguarding your position in the hierarchy, you would know that knowledge is the price for *everything*. You cannot simply opt out of Martian society, Cawl. You are a part of it, it is a part of you, for good or ill. You have broken the lore. I can protect you, for a price. Or you can perish.'

'Then I will serve you,' he said.

'Good,' she said. 'Good.' She rubbed together half a dozen manipulators. The flasks on her chest banged on the elbows. 'Congratulations on your ascension to the next rank. Your days of itinerancy are over, Adept Belisarius Cawl.'



Belisarius Cawl - Tech-Acolytum.

NINE

The Ill-wyrd

They said the Ruinstorm was abating.

Abating was a relative term.

The Vlka Fenryka took Hel's ride through the warp. Their ships shook in the eddies of dying cross currents. All of the Rout suffered black dreams when they slept, so much so that many of them quietly took to staying awake.

The Rout remembered their youthful voyages upon Fends' seas. A source of good-natured debate on Fenris was whether winter sailing or summer sailing was worst. The voyage through the warp was a summer voyage. Towering waves, the sweltering heat, the deadly upheaval of land and water, all felt like it was going on outside the plasteel hulls of their refuges. Upon Fenris, the Rout were masters of their own destiny, their own will pitted against the best efforts of their planet to kill them. There a man's skill as much as his wyrd dictated whether or not he would die in the hot oceans of summer or upon the iron-hard ice of winter. Aboard a void ship they were at the mercy of others. They crouched in their smoky dens, chanting the cantrips they had learned upon ships of wood into echoing halls of plasteel. Every threshold gained new warding eyes and thickets of protective runes. Though only the Navigators could see the things clawing at the outside of the Geller fields, every thinking being on board those vessels could sense them.

Corridors quaked. Hasty repairs were undone by violent shivers running the lengths of the ships. Metal shrieked with the stress. Subsonic noise from the straining warp engines stuttered through the fabric of vessels, worsening the atmosphere. The integrity generators struggled, and cabling feeding the fields gave out in showers of sparks, necessitating hurried replacement.

The warp warned them that they were not welcome.

Leman Russ had his fleet push on regardless.

Three times during their voyage, Russ attempted to speak with Kva about what must be done upon Fenris. Every time, Kva rebuked his primarch.

'Not now, my lord!' he would say. 'We sail the Sea of Souls. The Underverse is watching. We cannot speak of such things until we are safely home, where Morkai may guard our souls. Be patient.'

Each time, Russ growled and stalked off, dissatisfied. He tried to speak with other Rune Priests but they backed away on seeing him coming, body language submissive but resolute. Even the kaerl-gothi avoided him, and so he took to his quarters, and there brooded upon what must be done, until he grew sick of the smell of them and their closeness, and went to the Wolfs Hall where he brooded some more.

Leman Russ sat alone in the Wolf's Hall. He drank wine from a goblet, for the hard intoxication mjod gifted was unpalatable to him at that time. Wine could not dull his senses in the same pleasurable way, or raise his war-spirit for the murder-make, but there was a sophistication in good wine that he craved. The taste evoked lost summers and far-off lands. Wine was a sorrowful drink. It completed his mood.

So he drank a drink that could not affect him, and idly named to himself the chemical compounds his keen hunters senses discerned in the liquid.

Attempts to unpick his wyrd had failed. His runes lay in a confusing pattern across the floor. Dorn's anger on Terra still stung at him. Sanguinius withdrawn behaviour worried him. And Magnus' last words echoed daily in his ears. *You are a sword in the wrong hands. You have severed an innocent neck.*

He stared around the hall. He had been duped once. In pursuing Horus he could be making the wrong decision again. Choosing the Fenrisian way of outright attack over Terran circumspection could be wrong. The trouble was, it wouldn't be clear until it was too late.

He snorted. He was neither Terran nor Fenrisian. Sometimes, he didn't know what he was.

He heard the quiet mechanisms of a lesser door working at the back of the hall. To his sharp ears the sound was as good as any herald. When the doors rolled back into the walls to reveal Kva, Russ was already staring unblinkingly at where he knew the Rune Priest would be.

Few but Kva could stand Russ' piercing stare when he was in contemplative mood.

The Rune Priest was not old by Legiones Astartes standards, but his disease made him appear so. He walked with obvious effort across the black stone floor, his armour amplifying his difficulty for others to see even as it aided him to move. He glanced at the scattered runes, careful not to crush them underfoot.

'Kva,' said Russ.

Freki yawned widely. Fangs like combat knives glinted in the firelight. Geri stared at Kva, his feral intelligence shining from his yellow, black-pinned eyes. With no warriors in it the Wolfs Hall was sepulchrally dark and gloomy. Flames in bowls and atop candles cast wavering roads of fire onto the granite flooring. The occasional shudder running down the ship's length contorted the flames and

broke the roads. Then, as the tremors passed, they rebuilt their routes to their unseen destinations.

'I cannot give you the answers you need, Great Jarl,' said Kva. 'I say this for the fourth time. The wights are watching. They will come to the slightest summons, however unintentional.'

'I know, I know.' Russ waved his free hand impatiently. 'It is too perilous to lay out the rituals of the Underverse while in the warp.

'I recognise my failing and will be sure to correct it,' said the primarch, only half ironically.

Kva tilted his head to the side and scrutinised Russ carefully. 'You are the primarch, you do not need to justify your actions to anyone. We will follow you anywhere.'

Russ reached for his silver ewer of wine. 'If you let me believe I'm infallible, we could have all sorts of problems,' he said. 'I am arrogant enough as it is.'

The Wolf leaned forwards in his throne and put his goblet down on a low table of thornwood, every inch of which was covered in carved, twisting beasts. A second goblet was there. Russ gestured for Kva to help himself then poured a huge measure into his own goblet, before passing him the ewer.

'Drink with me,' he said. 'I am going to talk. You are going to listen.'

Kva sniffed the air. 'Wine?'

'Wine,' said Russ. 'From the Lion's vineyards. A gift of friendship.' He smiled. 'It is dark, bitter and complicated in flavour.'

'That adequately describes your relationship with him.'

Russ laughed, a solitary bark. 'Yes.' He stared off across the dark floor, as if he could see troubling portents beneath the stone's surface.

There was a chair nearby the throne's dais. After pouring himself a measure, Kva sat down without waiting for permission, and leaned wearily on his staff. Many allowances were made for his condition.

'If you want to talk, then talk, my jarl,' said Kva.

Russ stirred himself. 'Talk,' he said. 'This spear,' he pointed his thumb over his shoulder without turning around, 'I have never liked it.'

'The truth of this is known to all the Vlka,' said Kva.

It was telling that the spear had never had another name than the 'Spear of the Emperor'. An outsider would think nothing of this, but one who knew the culture of Fenris well would see a superstitious dread at work. All weapons had names, true names like those of a man or a woman, names that not only described them, but set their wyrd in the metal of their making, foretold their use and hinted at their end. A weapon gave power to the warrior who named it. The Spear of the Emperor had adopted its name simply by being what it was.

'You have never named your father's gift,' said Kva.

Russ nodded and took a deliberate swallow of wine. 'I am going to tell you why. I have never told anybody why. You will hear, and you will judge, divided one.'

'Then I am listening,' Kva said.

'This is why Leman Russ does not like the Spear of the Emperor, his father,' said Russ. 'The Emperor gave me the weapon in the wake of the Wheel of Fire.'

'Before my time, my jarl,' said Kva. 'Though I know the sagas well.'

'It was a long time ago,' said Russ. 'The first Varagyr were with me then, men who had fought by my side before the Emperor came. The old Terran legionaries were still with us too. We were a mongrel Legion, two breeds of savage fighting together as one. We were at that time known as the Wolves that Stalked the Stars, for a speech I made before the campaign.' He laughed again. 'You spend so much time on crafting these damn addresses to impress the remembrancers and scholiasts, you miss the obvious thing everyone will remember. Wolves that Stalk the Stars. Space Wolves.' He shook his head. 'A child's name. To ourselves, we were always the Rout. Do you know where the term came from?' asked Russ.

'An old insult taken to heart and turned back upon those who hurled it. The word-spear caught, reversed and buried in the heart of its owner.'

'That it was,' said Russ with satisfaction. 'It is one of the last remaining legacies of the Terran Sixth. Anyway, I had not long been reunited with the Legion. Horus and the Emperor decided to test me with *Eldkringla*, the Wheel of Fire. It was a region of unstable nebulae and wandering stars. A hell-place, crammed with greenskins. We were asked to destroy them, and we did.'

'That is our nature, my jarl.'

'Aye, it is, but we wore down our teeth doing it. This mongrel Legion overthrew an ork empire that had resisted all earlier attacks. It took five years, and cost the Sixth a third of its strength.'

Russ poured himself more wine.

'For killing a billion orks and losing a third of the Rout, I was given two gifts. The greatest was the Aett, though not the name. Those bloody fools in the Chamber Castellanis probably thought they were being funny calling it the Fang. The other was that spear.

'There was a ceremony. The Allfather is cunning in His use of those. For the seeming of it, I don't think He enjoys them, if He enjoys anything. Ferrus was there, and so was Horus. Ferrus had recently been found, and he was looking all stem like he did before Fulgrim cut his head off, though I think he was just bewildered by it all. The Allfather has that effect. That parade was so calculated. The Allfather's chance to show the world His third son, while He lauded His second. That was when He gave me the spear.' Russ growled. 'The spear was a spear - huge enough to be wielded by me, exceptionally well made, beautiful like

all the Emperor's gifts are, but it only appeared to be nought but a spear, until I touched it.'

Russ drank some more, poured some more, and continued.

'The moment the Lord of Mankind handed me that weapon, I felt its ill-wyrd cross my soul. My smile near slipped off my face. I managed to keep it as I accepted the honour,' he stressed the word sarcastically. 'You cannot hide anything from my father. I expected Him to show some sign of noticing my apprehension, to be offended, or to hesitate, but if He did sense my faltering, He said nothing. That troubled me more than the spear itself. He must have sensed my misgivings, because that is who He is, and if He did, which He would have done, and did not say anything, then the spear was doing whatever the spear was supposed to do. So I went back to my place next to Ferrus with a troubled heart and a face as humourless as his.

'When I returned to my pavilion, I could not wait to let go of the thing. As a gift of the Emperor it was hung in pride of place over my other weapons, but I am not ashamed to say I could not look at it, and nor would I touch it. I have never used it in battle.'

What Russ said next was lost as the *Hrafnkel* encountered a hardened knot in the empyrean's weave and jumped. The ewer rocked on its base. Geri lifted his head and looked towards the ceiling. Coals jumped from a couple of the firebowls. They bounced across the floor, sending out parties of short-lived embers that glinted orange in the dark.

The engines howled, rising several pitches, falling, rising again, a sound more eerie than any wolf's call. The ship quietened. Their passage levelled. Russ waited a moment while aftershocks trembled the vessel before continuing.

'All this took place on Seraphina V. Have you ever been to the system?' asked Russ.

'No, my jarl.'

'If YOU do avoid the fifth planet. It's as hot as the *Fimbolsommer*, and less charming. The war was fought for Seraphina, the system and she stars around it. The Wheel of Fire remains empty. Nobody wanted it.

'Later that day as I drank stale mjod alone in my sweltering tent I found myself falling asleep. I have learned a little of how we were made from the Allfather. He told me the prime functions of sleep in an unaltered human are the cleaning of the cerebiospiml fluids of damaging proteins and the consolidation of memoir. In His primarchs, these needs are serviced by other processes. Hus is why I do not sleep often, once I had shed the habit. But that day I slept without meaning to. That was unusual. Of equal note, I dreamed.'

He paused for a long time then, perhaps wavering on the cusp of revelation, weighing the worth of sharing against the danger of doing so. Kea waited

patiently. Eventually, the primarch drained his wine cup again and continued.

This is what I saw, Kva. You tell me what it means. I stood on a desolate plain recently cleansed by fire The reek of hyper-accelerant suggested promethium as the means of destruction. The heat radiating from the baked earth told me the barrage was finished only a few hours before The ground steamed. Heavy clouds of smoke bruised the sky in grey and purple. The world's sun was rising, and its light slanted beneath the smother of war. A molten glow poured over the aftermath, lighting the clouds from beneath, and dazzling me As I held up my left hand to shelter my eyes, I noted a brighter light shining above my head, and I turned and saw I held the Spear of the Emperor in my right hand. The world was black. My armour was dirtied by fumes and smuts. Everything was filthy, but not the spear. It was as clean as if it had been polished by the blademakers. It reflected the rays of the sun and returned them twofold, outshining it.

The spear was the only beautiful thing in that place. There was nothing alive. Uniform soot furred every surface soaking up the golden light. A quality of this contrast was a hyper-reality. 'I felt that I really was there that the dream was real and that the waking world was not.'

'It was real,' said Kva. 'A different level of being, but no less real than this hall we sit in now.'

'I have told myself that cannot be that the Imperial Truth denies it.'

'The Imperial Truth is a blunt tool,' said Kva. 'And sometimes it is not true.'

Kva's heresy meant nothing to Russ. He had always forged his own path.

'A landscape of blackened bones stretched in every direction from my feet,' said Russ. They were carbonised by whatever terrible weapon had atomised their cloak of flesh. The smell of burned meat choked me, wrapped itself about me, so thick I thought I might never be rid of it. It was worse than the smouldering pyre of Tizca after the Censure Host had done with it Trees made charcoal sketches of themselves clawed at the sky. This had been a living world, but all had burned to slag.

And then I saw that fragments of armour lay amid the ash. The paint had burned away and the ceramite was discoloured purple by the heat of its unmaking. A pauldron lay close by my feet that retained some of its colour. I knew I was asleep and I knew what I would see if I were to pick it up, but the logic of dreams compelled me to bend over, and fish the guard from the filth. I was a spectator to actions undertaken by some other agency.

The ceramite was crumbly in my hand, so I turned it over gingerly. On the other side, burned almost to invisibility, was a snarling wolf's head, as I expected.

'I dropped the plate. It shattered into fragments upon the ground. Flakes of ceramite blew away on the wind. Again, as is the way with dreams, I noted only then that the bones were not those of ordinary men, but of the Legiones Astartes.

'My warriors were dead around me by the hundreds, if not the thousands. The realisation of it pricked out more detail for me, and I saw many suits of broken armour, and wolf skulls atop men's bodies.' Russ was troubled. He no longer looked upon Kva, but stared off at sights lodged in his memory.

'What battlefield it was, I do not know. The identity of the enemy was also hidden from me. As it turned out, the scene was only a stage for what was to come.

'The sun rose past the level of the clouds, and the land was cast into darkness. I was seized by a terrible foreboding. A black wind blew, blasting up the ashes of the dead and whirling them into my face so that I tasted the burned meat of them. Within the wind a dire howling sounded.'

'The sound of the wolf can be a good or bad omen in a dream like this,' said Kva.

'It was a bad omen,' insisted Russ. 'Louder and more harrowing than the call of the greatest of the lone wolf kings. A second howl joined the first, twinned with it, singing in chorus. It was a challenge, and a portent of death.

'From out of the black snow of ash stalked the greatest wolf I have ever seen. It was as large as an Imperial Knight, two-headed, with burning red eyes and a burning red mouth. It came towards me, and I knew it was there to kill me. Who else could it have been, but Morkai? The great wolf itself, the world ender. I set the spear and prepared to do battle. He did not disappoint me.

'We fought, Morkai and I, for an age. His breath was the thunder, his teeth the lightning. I was the fury of the tempest. The ground shook at our battle, the sky boiled and fire stabbed down wherever I struck. His eyes blazed, his jaws snapped, but I was never where his blows landed. I moved with such speed, I danced, Kva. I danced with the spear and with death!'

'Did you wound him, my lord?'

Russ picked up the ewer, and made a face of annoyance when he found it empty. He put it down.

'Many times I struck him. His body parted like smoke before the spear. I did not harm him. Once, I cleaved down between his heads with the blade.' He chopped the edge of his hand into his opposite palm. 'He reformed and renewed his attack. I could not wound him.'

'He is not flesh. He is the essence of death. He cannot be killed,' said Kva. 'So how did you win?'

'I did not say that I did,' said Russ.

'There is only one way to face Morkai and survive,' said Kva, 'and that is to beat him.'

'I did not beat him. We were still fighting when I awoke, covered in sweat, my hearts beating as loudly as the forges of the Hammerhold. I was not alone. Horus

had come to speak with me about my next campaign. Perhaps his arrival had awoken me. Perhaps I would be dead now if he had not come when he did. He thought it amusing he had found me asleep. And then he said something that was entirely understandable, but in the wake of the dream it seemed a little strange.'

'What did he say?' said Kva.

'Horus looked at the Emperor's gift and said, 'That is a good spear"

'I see,' said Kva.

'I don't think he ever liked me, not like some of the others,' said Russ. 'He always respected me, he always knew how to get the best out of me, but he was jealous from the start. I was the second found, and when I returned I took the light of father from him. '

'A problem all eldest sons experience.'

'True,' said Russ. 'When we found our third brother—'

The ship ran through another squall left over from the Ruinstorm's dissipation. The shaking it experienced sent the sparse furniture sliding across the stone. The ewer danced to the very edge of the table. Russ' words were drowned out. '—and we know how tragic that tale was. And then there was Perms, then the rest. I think Horus mastered his emotions after me. He never behaved with the others that same way he did in those first months after my return. It is strange. Horus and I had this connection that was unique to our relationship. I changed his world.' He shook his head. 'He always was too proud. I never cared. I am one of Twenty. The others were always going to come,' said Russ. 'Maybe if I had been the first, like him, then I would have known this jealousy. Perhaps not. I was never envious of his position as the most favoured son. When he was made Warmaster, I was not one of those who complained. I was made for a task. I perform it.

'I found Horus' jealousy petty.'

'You are not Horus,' said Kva.

Russ smiled bitterly. The *Hrafnkel* grumbled in sympathy.

'What does it mean, Kva? What does the dream *mean*?'

'You shall die wielding the Spear of the Emperor,' said Kva without hesitation. There was no need to obfuscate the hard truth or flatter with a lie. That was not the way of the Vlka Fenryka.

In the same spirit Russ accepted Kva's pronouncement. 'That was what I thought.' For the first time he turned around and looked at the spear directly. 'I should throw it out of an airlock,' he said. 'If I rid myself of it, I may change my wyrd.'

'I do not think you will,' said Kva. 'No man can change their wyrd. Not even you.'

'You are right,' said Russ, 'for as much as I hate it and what it showed me, somehow, it is important. I cannot get rid of it. I have tried, not very hard, but how hard could it be to lose a weapon? I have lost many! Every time I leave it somewhere, it is returned to me. I doubt hurling it into the heart of a star would yield a different result, I only do not try for fear that it will be lost. You see the contradiction.' He gave a wry smile. 'No, I am fated to keep it even if it cuts my thread itself.' He looked Kva in the eye. 'Maybe it is not an ill wyrd but a false wyrd.' He clenched his fist. 'I cannot be sure. The runes show me nothing. I set out to kill another of my brothers, and I do not know if it is the right course of action. Tell me, Kva, how is a man of two worlds who is yet of neither to know the truth of his wyrd?'

'He never can,' said Kva. 'I know from experience.'

Russ sank deeper into his throne. 'I was afraid you would say that.'

TEN

The Lord Of Mars

The omnispex went green, and the adjudicator rang a tinny clarion.

'Pass,' said Cawl. 'The Machine-God bless you in all your undertakings.'

The thallax strode out of the screening bay on mechanical legs. Cawl left it in a dreamlike state, its higher functions deactivated as Domina Hester Aspertia Sigma-Sigma preferred. Cawl half-heartedly flicked scented oils over the thallax from an aspergillum and watched it go to join the silent ranks of its comrades. He would have liked to know what was going on in the man's brain, floating there in the metal casing, unable to influence his own actions. It was normal for the Mechanicum troops to undergo direct control from their clade masters from time to time. They expected it, even welcomed it as a chance to commune directly with the Machine-God. But the level of control Sigma-Sigma exerted over her minions was unusual, and probably unhealthy.

And now, he thought, *I am one of them*.

He called the next thallax forward to the status bay. Seven hundred and eighty-eight were left to inspect. At two minutes, three

seconds an inspection on average, he was going to be on the thallax line for at least another twenty-six hours.

By the Machine-God, the work was very dull, and exactly the reason he had not settled into one role for long. Cawl never wanted to be bolted into one hole and forgotten about. It looked like it had finally happened.

He waved the next thallax through after the most cursory of examinations. Its tall ceramite war frame tramped forwards. The thallaxii were cyborgs like the skitarii, though you couldn't tell that from the outside. They looked like robots. Only the brain and spine remained of the original human, held inside an armoured amniotic tank. The rest was machinery. Cawl called them all 'he', although any one of them or indeed all of them could have been women. It didn't really matter what pronoun you used once they scooped out your brain and threw away the rest.

The icon for an infospheric digimissive blinked in the artificial display of his third eye. He opened it with a thought.

Cawl. Attend me now, it read. No sign off. No audio or pict. Aspertia Sigma-Sigma.

Another adept was already approaching to take over Cawl's shift. He had gone further down the road to union with the Machine-God than Cawl had, and wore rank badges several grades higher than Cawl's. The lower half of his face had been replaced, along with all four of his limbs. There wasn't much more of him that was flesh than there was in the thallaxii.

'Go,' the adept blurted. A single string directive of audible binaric.

Cawl handed over the medical omnispex and aspergillum without a word, and went away to find his mistress, glad to be free of the thallax line.

Domina Hester Aspertia Sigma-Sigma was in the Heptaligon's central data transfer nexus in Tria Station. The thallax line was in Seconda, so Cawl was required to take two low-pressure hyperspeed transit pods to get there. By the time he nudged his way through the throng of Mechanicum adepts clustered around the central hololith pit he was late again, and something momentous was already afoot. The room was dark. All faces were turned inwards. The adepts were silent, and resentful of his clumsy progress towards his mistress.

At the head of the crowd was the lord of the Trisolian forge world, the Viceroy Extractatorian Benician Mendoza. Sigma-Sigma was by Mendoza's side, as befitted her status as Taghmata Macro Clade Leader. She pulsed Cawl a disapproving data burst as he joined her.

Cawl arrived as an image was wavering into being. It took its time in focusing, until hovering over the imaging pit was a Mechanicum tech-adept clad in black robes. The birth-gender was indeterminate. The figure had altered itself far from the human norm. Odd angles under its garments suggested little of the original body remained. The face was invisible. Reflections on lenses hinted at multiple bionic eyes beneath the hood.

There was nothing out of the ordinary about that there were far more extreme cybermorphs in the Mechanicum than this person, but there was something about the adept that was wrong. Although many in the room with Cawl were similarly enhanced as the figure, the messenger seemed arachnid in ultimate origin rather than mammalian, and its uncanniness did not stop there.

The adept had a trick to play, as shameless as any dazzling feat performed for the benefit of feral-worlders by an explorator fleet. The hololith's projection ribbons wavered in a way that they should not. Heavily striated mote strands evened themselves into a true-pict-quality image. Frameshift technologies made flaws inevitable; they could not be ironed out. That was physics. At close range and in good conditions, the best holocast provided a phantom figure, and yet here the adept in the image was totally lifelike, and that was beyond the ability of the Martians. As surely as a conjuror ostentatiously performs progressive stages of his deception, each limitation of hololith technology dropped away. Audio buzz crackled to silence. The jag and tear common in long-range holocasts smoothed

itself away. The blueness particular to the Trisolian comm grid melted into vibrant colour. Distortion flicker in the beam alignment faded to zero oscillations per microsecond. The instruments used to monitor the hololith - in that particular case discreetly hidden in the pit around the base of the projection aperture - ceased their symphony of quiet hums, leaving the tech-adepts manning the device staring in confusion.

And then, the finale: a subtle conclusion, and more powerful for it. There was more to the image than visual veracity. Somehow, Cawl wasn't sure how - and judging by the noises the others witnessing this technological marvel made, nor was anyone else - but somehow it ceased to be an image, and became real.

Until that moment lifeless, the figure's robes stirred in a warm breeze that blew, impossibly, from the image. Incredibly, they could smell the sacred oils greasing the adept's augmetics, the incense, the holy unguents of operation coating machine parts. The quality of the audio band approached, then exceeded, that of a hardline vox. It was all impossible.

Vocal murmurs and bleeps of binaric filled the room. They were wondering how it was done. Cawl was. Everyone was.

And then the figure spoke.

'Greetings to you all, faithful of the Machine-God.' The voice was female, and passionate - strangely emotive, to say it came from such an augmented being. Cawl did not let it fool him with its missionary zeal. It was her only trace of humanity, and though the voice was beautiful, there was a phlegmy catch to certain words that was not human at all. 'I bring word to you from Mars. I am Sota-Nul, emissary of the new Mechanicum to Warmaster Horus Lupercal, saviour of the Imperium.' Consternation greeted this latest pronouncement.

'The false Mechanicum!' the Viceroy Extractatorian exclaimed. 'You reveal your allegiance. Terminate this conversation!'

The tech-adepts in the machine pit poked unsurely at their machines. They raised faces of pallid flesh and oily metal to their master.

'We cannot deactivate the projector, my lord,' whispered one who was healthily afraid.

'Disconnect it!'

'My lord, it already is disconnected,' said another, more fearfully than the first.

The hololith's attendant adepts began to chant. The highest of them picked up a bronze hammer on a chain, kissed it, whispered ritual words over it, and smashed the glass front of a box attached to the pit wall to retrieve the coil of emergency incense kept inside. An alarm rang at the insult.

'You cannot disengage this channel of communication. Only I have that power, and you will hear me out,' the she-thing said passionately.

Cawl had thought Aspertia Sigma-Sigma horribly unnerving. This Sota-Nul was far worse.

'My colleagues, my brothers in the faith, I am a servant of the true Mechanicum. The Mechanicum of Mars. Do you not see those you follow are of Terra, and not of our kind? Zagreus Kane is a puppet.

'A lord without domain. You are homeless, cut off from the wellspring of all knowledge. We offer you leadership and unity under the Fabricator General, he who was appointed by the will of the holy synods, who operate under direction of the Motive Force, the Machine-God who moves among us.'

Cawl sniffed. Smell was a neglected sense in a people who disdained the body and sought the higher purity of machine life - it was too animal a sense, too vulgar - but he retained the use of his nose, and something rank caught at it, crawled inside and clung like bad oil to the back of his throat. His machine senses registered nothing wrong, indeed, they detected no unusual olfactory input at all, but his birth smell caught a taint on the air blowing from the image, if indeed it was an image, that turned his stomach. Rotten meat, and blood. There was something moving in the background behind Sota-Nul, something unclean.

'Ties!' exclaimed the Viceroy Extractatorian. 'Hal turned his back on mankind. I will not do the same.'

'My fellow seekers after knowledge!' implored Sota-Nul. 'Do not take my word for it. I have a message for you, please listen. Heed wisdom!'

The image went out of focus as though it were viewed underwater. When it cleared, Kelbor-Hal was there, sat upon the throne of Mars, the white-and-black cog teeth of its Cog Mechanicum backrest framing him.

'Hal!' shouted the Extractatorian, his out-thrust finger quivering with accusation. 'How dare you show your face?'

He hasn't, thought Cawl. This is a recording.

So it was. Though exceedingly lifelike, Kelbor-Hal lacked the realism of his emissary. There was no movement or smell, though the clarity of the image was amazing enough in itself.

'Citizens of the Empire of Mars. I am Lord Kelbor-Hal, Fabricator General, and your rightful lord,' he stated pointlessly. Every member of the fraternis technis, from idiot hygiene thralls one misdemeanour from servitorhood to the rulers of forge worlds, knew Hal's appearance. 'I demand your fealty. Turn your face from the false Omnissiah of Terra. Open your eyes and see that you have been deceived. The so-called Emperor came to us with deception in His heart, demanding our technology and our servitude. We were blinded by His power. He is a witch, who used His abilities to cloud our minds, and a data-thief. Join with me, your master, and you v u inheritors of all knowledge. Behold, the bargain of the Warmaster. See what we are promised.'

Widecast data pulse filled every head capable of receiving it with the new treaty of Mars. The opening of the forbidden vault of Moravec Horus' generous gift of the Auretian technocracy's standard template construct data. The continued autonomy of Mars. All things the Emperor had denied them. The crowd murmured.

'If the Warmaster's generosity towards our nation does not convince you, consider this,' continued Hal. 'The servants of the false Omnissiah of Terra have appointed Zagreus Kane as Fabricator General. Never before has an outside power imposed a ruler upon Mars. The Mechanicum is to be dissolved. Our independence is no more. This new Adeptus Mechanicus will forever subordinate the rights of Mars to the Terran Hegemony. With this act the Emperor has concluded the stealthy conquest of our empire He began two centuries ago. He is a false god. He would deny us the tools to seek greater union with the true god, the Machine-God, because He is envious of our wisdom, and He is afraid. Join with us. Join with the Warmaster, and cast down the false Omnissiah's empire so Mars may be reborn!'

The message faded away.

'Isn't he boxed up on Mars?' said Cawl to Aspertia Sigma-Sigma. She looked down at him. The unmoving features of her mask managed to convey her scorn adequately enough. Cawl was not discouraged. He spoke up louder, addressing the room.

'Hal is trapped,' he said. 'He doesn't seem to be in a strong position to be making demands of anyone.'

The look the Viceroy Extractatorian gave Cawl was no less damning than Aspertia's.

'Who is this person?' he asked.

'He is no one,' said Aspertia Sigma-Sigma.

'I am Adept Belisarius Cawl, recently elevated in Domina Hester Aspertia Sigma-Sigma's service,' he said.

'Then, Adept Cawl, be quiet,' said the Extractatorian. Sota-Nul re-emerged on the hololith. She walled with mannered patience.

The Viceroy Extractatorian's hunched body unfolded, standing tall with the clacking of additional joints locking into place.

'Reason dictates, Sota-Nul, that you are to demand our surrender. If not, we will be destroyed.'

'This is correct. The Warmaster is not a monster, he offers peace, but if you stand in his way he will destroy you,' said Sota-Nul.

'We will not yield,' said the Viceroy Extractatorian.

'Then I offer further variables for input. The Warmaster sends but a portion of his mighty fleets to bring you to heel, but the force that will descend is far more

than your miserable outpost can muster in opposition. Nine Legions come to aid the new Mechanicum. You will be obliterated.' She paused. 'Trisolian, forge world of the Mechanicum, think carefully with whom your loyalty lies. Mars, or Terra.'

Every ocular sensor in the room went to the Viceroy Extractatorian. The Viceroy Extractatorian snapped his fingers. An officious looking minor adept shuffled forwards, his all-encompassing robes dragging over the deck. He held a covered object. The Viceroy nodded. With hands covered in sleeves, the bearer pulled free the cloth over his burden.

As everyone leaned back in horror, Cawl leaned forwards, fascinated. Under the cloth was a magnetic flask of clear crystalflex. Something angry was held inside, bashing against the transparent metal and shrieking. Tiny mouths appeared in its form, which at one moment was a cloud of pinkish vapour, the next a swarm of numbers, the next darts of circuit board light.

'We have heard of what occurred on Mars, and at Calth. Did you think to catch us unawares? As soon as your message reached our receivers we quarantined this from a substratum of your carrier signal. You will not subvert our defences as you did at Calth, you will come here and you will find us ready for you.'

'You are a traitor to Mars and the Cult Mechanicus,' said Sota-Nul. 'You are the traitor. This scrapcode is infused with unholy energies. It is a synthesis of science and sorcery the product of Moravec's folly!' he fulminated. 'These are forbidden paths.'

'Forbidden by the Emperor.'

'No!' shouted the Extractatorian. 'Forbidden by the tenets of our faith! The Emperor might not be the Omnissiah. The argument is irrelevant! Without Him, Mars was a dying empire, tempted to dabble in things best undisturbed. Your display here has swayed the more impressionable among us, but not I. I know it for what it is. This is not technology you employ. It is darkness. It is you who betray the Machine-God.'

Sota-Nul laughed, a moist, rasping sound that was as inhuman as her mechanical body.

'So be it, servant of the false Omnissiah. If destruction is what you desire, the Warmaster has a plenitude to spare.'

The hololith gave out with a bang. The machines hosting it burned out, sending electrical feedback racing around the chamber's circuitry. Servitors moaned. The lights went out.

A whiff of brimstone hung on the air. Emergency lumens flickered on.

Immediately the Viceroy Extractatorian began issuing orders. 'Cleanse this place! Remove all machines that have partaken in any of the projected energies and have them destroyed. Eliminate all servitors who helped process this signal.

Sigma-Sigma, if the enemy have utilised the hololith, they are close. We must prepare for war, and guard against infiltration. All military assets are to be activated immediately. All extraction operations are hereby suspended."Why come here?' said Cawl to Sigma-Sigma. He interrupted her. She was busy with three inferiors present and probably remotely.

'What?' she said angrily. 'I do not think you understand how this relationship works. I speak, you are silent.'

'No, no, no, no, no,' said Cawl. 'You are not listening to me. Listen! Why does the Warmaster come here? We're nowhere. We have nothing that he might need. You have a military mind, domina. Why?'

'So you seek to suck my knowledge from me as you have your previous masters?' she said.

'I am asking for enlightenment from one with greater comprehension,' said Cawl as humbly as he could manage.

Sigma-Sigma gave a metallic sigh.

'We offer a point of resupply for any Imperial forces who might threaten the Warmaster's rear,' she said.

'But his armies are on the other side of us, galactically speaking.'

Aspertia Sigma-Sigma bent down over Cawl. 'Yes. But when he moves to take Beta-Garmon, we will not be.'

Quick as a whip crack, her long serpentine body looped around and she sped away, her mechapeds rattling. Scattering smaller techpriests she headed off on some mysterious errand of her own.

Or maybe, thought Cawl, she doesn't want to answer any more of my questions. If Cawl possessed a shred of self-doubt, he might have thought her annoyed by his ignorance, and been humbled. But if Cawl was blessed with a surfeit of anything, it was self-belief. His question was valid.

According to data traffic, four out of five of Trisolian's highest ranking Taghmata officers after Sigma-Sigma were in the room. So why had she gone?

He found the speed of her departure suspicious.

ELEVEN

Road To The Underverse

A century, a day; how long did the fleet of the Space Wolves cleave its way through the troubled empyrean before it re-emerged? Time liquefied in the warp, running out through faults in creation, leaving a man's soul drowning for lack of minutes, seconds, and hours. It could have been a year or a decade or a thousand years when the translation warning was broadcast across the fleet. The Vlka Fenryka had no fondness for flight. They did not trust countdowns and failsafes. The klaxon sounded in enough time for them to mutter their charms against maleficarum, before the ship crashed out of the empyrean back into the material universe.

The ships bucked. Alarms squealed from multiple systems. Reactors beat irregularly, like hearts undergoing arrest. The warp did not want to let its playthings go. The machineries of humanity said otherwise, rending at the membrane between somewhere and nowhere, and pushing out the ships in violent rebirth.

The warp rift flared with indigo flames. Space split. The rift formed like a tear in flesh unevenly ripped by a predator's teeth. Sprays of solidifying corposant geysered thousands of kilometres across space, unlight added a malevolent star to the heavens that was too slow in dying.

As wolf ships of Fenris, rigged for ice but encountering open water, the fleet went from one sea to another in disarray, almost foundering on the change of cosmic texture. Real space dragged at their keels. Disturbance patterning turned their Geller fields into plasma storms of unnatural colour. Blue witch-fire clung to tower, spire and gun barrel. Engine stacks guttered. Smaller ships tumbled uncontrollably end over end.

Niddhoggur's reactor went offline after it regained real space. The vast ship drifted dangerously across the path of its sisters, necessitating frantic evasion. The fleet scattered like an outmatched wolf pack. The warp rift shut reluctantly, leaving the fleet adrift across sudden darkness. The Wolf's Eye lit hulls facing the system's centre with angry white light. All else was hidden by the hard black shadow only found in the airless void, the killing black, colder than the worst of winters.

The Vlka Fenryka remained adrift. Had an enemy come across the fleet during those helpless minutes they would have found the Wolves easy prey.

Engines stuttered. Ships recovered. They returned to formation slowly. The void was not the Vlka Fenryka's favoured hunting ground.

Once properly arrayed, they trekked inwards to the system core, where Fenris neared the end of its orbital track, and the beginning of the end of the Season of Fire.

Fenris turned beneath the ships' keels in the blazing light of the Great Year's summer.

'Bring us home!' the primarch ordered. 'Take us into the Aett.'

There was an energy to the command deck. The Legion was pleased to return to their den.

Few mountains like the Fang existed in the galaxy. Geography proclaimed it part of a chain of mountains, the *Volda Hammarki*, the World Spine, whose uplift raised the continent of Asaheim out of the world's crust so far it was beyond remaking. But the Fang was more than simply another peak.

Seven mountains made up the World Spine massif. Sprawling foothills piled up to the ring of six surrounding the Fang. They were giants in their own right that scraped the underside of space with their summits. Any one would have been crowned the king of mountains on another world, but the Fang was of a different order, a conical mass of black granite as tall as the heavens. The summit broke through the planet's atmospheric envelope sure as a sword thrust. The smaller mountains guarded it, like Legion veterans protecting their lord. In the same way the Legiones Astartes could not compare to their primarchs, so was the Fang immeasurably greater than the other peaks of Asaheim. The others were linked to it by ridges and treacherous snow bridges, but all their efforts to embrace the Fang ceased halfway to the peak.

Bjorn was on the bridge with his betters, trying to stay out of the way. To his disquiet Kva had taken to following him about watching him.

'We return home when Fenris is at its most violent temper,' Bjorn said, for the sake of something to say.

'It is glorious. A time of power,' said Kva. Conversation made his scrutiny no easier to bear. Bjorn issued a noise by way of reply.

Fenris was a hard place that bred hard men and hard women. It was famous across the Imperium for its winters. The short summer was lesser known, but just as bad, if not worse. The Wolfs Eye shone at its largest in the sky. The northern dawn filled the horizon from side to side with white fire. Imperial astronomers opined that if Fenris' solar apsis were a few hundred thousand kilometres closer, or if its orbital pass were a few days longer, the world would have been uninhabitable. The sun's furnace beat against the rock of the planet, melting the

sea ice, and stirring the atmosphere into cataclysmic storms. While the heat of the Wolfs Eye burned the surface, its gravity tugged at Fenris' heart. Volcanoes awoke and spat their molten blood in broad rivers. As night's terminator cut over them, they glowed in the dark as orange patches and lines that picked out the sutures in the planet's crust. The sky boiled with clouds of soot and ash that flickered with lightning. Higher still, the planet was encased in dazzling aurorae brought forth by the merciless force of the solar wind.

The ground shook. Islands sank into steaming seas, pulled down into the world forge. New lands of black stone were born to replace them, carried to the surface on upwellings of magma. Seas boiled, sending scalding fogs rolling across titanic waves and tides that swamped the highest land.

The *Hrafnkel* sailed northwards, over the open seas and plains.

'We return at the time of life,' said Kva. 'The wakefulness of Fenris will aid us.'

Tracts of lands buried beneath white snows for two Terran years turned a dazzling green, and though fires burned wildly across dry forests, they were too vast to die. Upon the plains of Asaheim herds of animals thousands strong moved across fruitful plains. Antlers dashed in the run. Predators grew fat on stolen calves.

The sea was stained with rusty brown streaks where billions of tons of kryll fed, bred and died. The water churned with monsters snatching millions of these tiny creatures up in cavernous mouthfuls. As on land, where the sea herds went, there were also things with teeth and claws.

'It will not last,' Kva went on. 'The solstice is days away and the short road to Helwinter beckons. We must be quick.'

Fire and frenzied life ravaged the surface, and through it all mankind struggled. In this hellish maelstrom men and women lived and died, competing with each other for the limited space in which to settle. As their home islands sank they took to the sea in wyrm— and wolf-boat. If they survived the water and the weather, if they evaded the monsters that swam the oceans, if they managed to overcome the rival tribes, they might find a new place to raise their halls. They might survive, they might live, but they would never prosper. Never that.

The struggles of the populace meant little to the Vlka Fenryka. The Fenrisians were heated by winter, hammered by storm, quenched in Helwinter ice, hardened for service in the Legion. So it had always been. For the Sky Warriors, this was but the natural cycle of things. The Rout descended to their lofty halls with greater things on their minds than the ordeals of mere men.

Nothing was left unsettled by the summer, not even the domain of Leman Russ. Not even the days and nights, for though Asaheim was athwart the pole, it could not rely on regular portions of dark and light. The Wolfs Eye tugged and pulled, tearing at the earth as a wolf tears at its victims, rocking it on its axis. A summer

night at the Fang might last for a week, the next for a few hours. But the mountain stood firm in the face of the sun, defying it to break its stone and soften its roots, to pull it down and melt it in the world's troubled core.

As the Legion arrived, one side of the Fang was lit by the sun's harsh white light. On the far side pitchy shadows lurked. Altostratus clouds sped around either side thousands of metres below the summit. The pearly shine of the stratosphere gave way to the glow of diffuse gases and tortured aurorae long before the top. The upper reaches, where the last gasps of atmosphere clung to the Fang's peak as gleaming frosts, were occupied by the fortress of the Space Wolves, called the Fang by other men, and the Aett by themselves.

Docks for smaller warships reached from the stone of the upmost levels. The part that projected into the void, the *Valgard*, had yet to be completed, and only half the docks were operational. Work had begun at an astonishing pace after the Wheel of Fire, but the war against Horus had slowed progress to a near standstill. Bjorn wondered if the Aett would ever be finished. Little appeared to have been accomplished since his last visit.

Half made, it was already the greatest fortress outside of the Imperial Palace itself, a vast castle conceived and begun before any other Legion had established bases on their own home worlds, and mightier than any that had followed.

The smaller ships descended directly to the summit-berths girding the Valgard. The rest took up station at high anchor, their passengers leaving aboard gunships and lighters that streamed into hangar slots like bats returning to the roost.

Ships scudded into the hangars, the thin blue line of atmospheric barriers painting cross sections over their hulls.

Russ' Stormbird slewed into its bay, turned its aggressive approach into a brief hover before slamming down. This was the Rout's way. The rockcrete landing apron was cracked by repeated hard landings.

Equally as hard, the boarding ramp slapped into the false stone.

No kaerls came to greet their returning lords. The air forced up the Aett's atmospheric circulation tubes was too thin. Servitors, their organic components enclosed completely against the cold and the lack of oxygen, formed Leman Russ' welcome party. With them was a single Space Wolf, helm sealed. He waited for his master to emerge while other ships performed similar manoeuvres, filling the hangar and others like it nearby with screaming engines and the crash of abused landing gear.

Four Wolf Guard in Cataphractii armour clumped down the ramp of Russ' transport into the landing bay. They paced outwards, alive to threat even in the heart of their primarch's fortress.

Leman Russ followed after. Alone of all the others spilling from their craft into the Aett, he went helmless.

His breath wisped in the rarefied air. 'Fritvilj!' he said. He strode over to the lone legionary and hauled him up into a bear's clasp, then held him at arm's length. 'Good to see you. I trust you've kept the fires lit and the wights away while we've been gone.' The primarch panted lightly as he spoke. The air was so thin it tested even his lungs.

'All is as it should be, my lord,' said Fritvilj. His voice crackled out of his helm. The last place in the hangar was taken, and Fritvilj raised his hand. Doors closed over the apertures. The sighing of atmosphere pumps raising the air's pressure became audible as the whine of engines spooling down died. 'The feasting halls are prepared. The Aett welcomes back the warriors to their den. It is too long since the sons of Fenris returned to hearth and home.'

Russ' good humour fled. 'Aye,' he said. 'If only more had come back alive. Best alert the fleshmakers before the feast masters. Too many of our brothers are sleeping on the red snow. There's a bitter take of frozen gene-seed to be harvested.'

He abruptly pushed past Fritvilj, leaving the hearth watcher stunned at the sudden shift in his humour.

The Wolf Guard clumped past him, wolf pelts swaying from their broad armoured shoulders.

A warrior of Tra followed the primarch. Fritvilj did not recognise him, but his markings showed him to be pack alpha, and his name to be Bjorn. His left hand was encased in a fine lightning claw. Russ was not in the habit of being accompanied by such lowly warriors. His presence puzzled Fritvilj.

The warrior, this Bjorn, tapped Fritvilj on the shoulder with the tip of an inactive claw blade. Metal squealed on metal.

'Don't be aggrieved, watch master,' he said. 'There is a bad wyrd on the Lord of Wolves.'

'Who are you to tell me this?' said the watch master, who outranked Bjorn by several degrees and was irked by the pack master's manner.

'It is simple,' said Bjorn dolefully. 'I share it.'

* * *

Bjorn hung back before joining his brothers at the Moot Feast. He might not have joined them at all, had Fith Godsmote not spotted him at the edge of the firelight's circle.

'Bjorn!' Godsmote called out. 'Bjorn! By the Allfather!' Godsmote rose up and engulfed Bjorn in a crushing hug, pulling him into the pack's feasting space.

'Ah, it's been too long, my old friend,' said Godsmote. 'I thought the primarch would never let you go.'

'I have been away from you for only a while, but much has happened. It has proved too long.' Bjorn looked over Godsmote's shoulder. The pack's losses from

Prospero and Alaxxes had been filled by men whose masks Bjorn did not know well.

'While I have been trailing after Russ like a whelp on Terra, our pack mates have already begun to form the warrior-bond with our new brothers.' Bjorn pitched his voice low so only Godsmote could hear.

'Gah, you old misery,' said Godsmote, holding Bjorn at arm's length. He smiled broadly, but his actions only made Bjorn conscious of his own missing limb.

'My brothers, this is Bjorn, our pack leader,' Godsmote said to the pack.

'That you have to say that says it all,' said Bjorn. Fith Godsmote had taken Bjorn's place in his absence, a temporary role that had the scent of permanence to it. When the new warriors greeted Bjorn, they looked to Godsmote for approval. Bjorn was a stranger, and his association with Leman Russ put more distance still between them.

'Sit down, drink. Tell us of your time with the primarch. You must have much to say,' said one.

'Not really,' said Bjorn. 'The Wolf King is as you would expect. He keeps nothing back from his sons. Why don't you tell me of your battles? There have been many I have not shared.'

They obliged, the younger ones eager to impress. Bjorn half listened. The hall of Tra was not so full as it once was. Every fire pit was lit, showing that many tables were empty. Those Vlka who remained alive were raucous, and filled the smoky chamber with their revelry, but though the feast was loud there was an emptiness beyond the shouted jests and the singing of the old songs. Echoes haunted them from places where more living noise should come but only wights lurked.

The Legion was deeply wounded. Bjorn could not imagine seeing all the benches full ever again. A quarter of Tra's strength was lost, and his Great Company had fared better than others. Onn had been particularly hard hit. Many had died with Lord Gunn. Russ had taken to speaking often with Bjorn, the unwanted confidence bringing him yet more discomfort. The primarch rued the jarl's recklessness, but so far as Bjorn could see, Russ was set upon a similar course of action. Two-thirds of the Legion had already died. Fyf's hall was funereal. Sepp's too. It was all too easy to imagine every one empty, and all feasting done. In the past when this had happened the hurt had been made good. Not this time. These were the end times, the days of the gods' war when Morkai would race through the heavens and reclaim his lost eye from the night.

'Bjorn?' said Godsmote. He rested a hand on Bjorn's shoulder. Bjorn blinked. The pack looked at him expectantly. Those that knew him well half smiled. The younger pack members stared. They had finished their stories. Bjorn had heard little of them.

'Good tales, brave actions,' said Bjorn earnestly. 'Your courage will give the skjalds much to sing of.' He stood carefully. 'I thank you for the drink and for your stories. Now I must away. I have matters to attend to.'

Godsmote looked at him in concern. 'Aye, more dealings with our Lord Leman Russ, no doubt!' he said to the others, with an enthusiasm his eyes could not match. He embraced Bjorn again, 'I understand your need for solitude,' he whispered in Bjorn's ear.

'But do not be a stranger, my brother. Come back to us soon. This is your pack, not mine.' Godsmote's sympathy burned at Bjorn as keenly as any insult, and he left with as much dignity as he could muster.

Bjorn hunted out a quiet spot away from all others. There he drank mjod until his head spun.

While in his cups, a powerful melancholy overcame him. With the tip of his long black fingernail, Bjorn scratched a symbol into the stone tabletop: one as old as humanity, the warding eye.

Bjorn had never been completely at one with his fellows. The hearty mockery that passed between the Vlka Fenryka came hard to him. The others thought him dour. If he had his way he would lead his pack in battle with honour, and be left in peace when not fighting. The close-living of the Aett grated at him. He hated to be enclosed. Give him the open skies and the cold, keen wind laced with prey scent. His nose twitched in memory of his solitary hunts. Alas, there would be no time for stalking. The Legion's stay at the Aett was to be measured in days. Above the unfinished Valgard, the forge-kaerls and blademakers raced to effect further repairs to the battered warships of the Wolves.

The stump of his left arm itched. He sank further into his private miseries, his glowering countenance hidden by his leather mask.

Soon, Bjorn was drunk. When he gulped his mjod it spilled into his beard. He didn't care.

Jarl Ogvai Ogvai Helmschrot held court from the high table. His manner towards Bjorn had cooled in recent months. Bjorn didn't blame him. How was a jarl supposed to treat a warrior so unconventionally elevated? There were customs and hierarchies in the Vlka Fenryka as there were in all societies: Russ had defied them. Ogvai had taken to ignoring him, though not from envy. Bjorn's favouring had the smack of wyrd to it. Fated men were ill-omened, for they brought death to others as they followed their bloody thread to its end. 'Hawser. I've become like Kasper Hawser,' slurred Bjorn. He truly Las a bad star. *I should have let him die on the ice*, Bjorn thought glumly. 'Ever since I shot down his ship and decided to rescue him, my thread has been snarled,' he added aloud.

Bjorn called a kaerl to him and bade him fill his horn to the brim. The kaerl's mask was that of a *saenyeti*. Bjorn squinted at him. The leather was pale grey

rather than red-brown, and furred, like the beast it represented. The mask wavered. The few mannish features the mask allowed him to see melted away. The beast was real. The kaerl was a *varutfing*, a shape-shifter. Bjorn started, knocking his horn and startling the kaerl, who once more became a man in a mask. The illusion vanished. Bjorn sent him away with an angry stare, watching him until he disappeared into the smoky gloaming. His gaze dropped to his horn. Mjod shimmered in the well of the vessel, dark as blood. He drank again.

In the space before the high table axe games were underway, and the spear catch, and other violent sports. Ogvai whooped and hammered his mjod horn harder than all the others upon the tables as a warrior fumbled a catch and the spear point opened up his forearm. The revelry seemed a sham to Bjorn. Helmschrot was trying too hard. The clash of empty lanxes and horns was similar to the funeral racket performed to drive the wights of the newly dead down into the Underverse where they could not harm the living.

'All wrong,' he muttered into his drink. 'It's all bloody wrong.' In Bjorn's body the Allfather's gifts fought a losing battle with the mjod. Bjorn's eyelids drooped.

'Bjorn the Fell-Handed!'

Bjorn came back to wakefulness, spilling his drink in his haste to reach the short iron sword he wore at his side.

Only one called him by that name.

A figure in grey battleplate had appeared in front of him, as uncanny as a wight emerging from the night. Two others lurked nearby, their white armour giving them the appearance of phantoms. All three were armoured and armed for war.

Bjorn woozily looked up at the haggard face of Kva Who-is-Divided. 'Kva,' he said.

'Stay your hand,' said the Rune Priest. 'Do not draw your blade.' A cloak of quiet enveloped them, drawing in the shadows like blankets, so the dark seemed sharper around Bjorn's hiding place. The noise of the feast faded and deepened, like a vox record played too slowly. The dance of the fires lost its vitality. The flicker of flame became a soporific strobe. Ogvai and the rest continued their feasting with arrested motion, slowed by the shaman's trick. The kaerls that moved among the Vlka changed. Like the server who had brought Bjorn his drink, they became animals that walked upon two legs and held their pitchers of mjod in fang and claw.

'Maleficarum,' he said. He did not draw his sword, but his hand remained upon the hilt.

'No witchcraft. The soul of Fenris works upon our threads,' said Kva.

'What do you want, bone shaker?' said Bjorn. He could not keep his eyes from the beast people drifting like mist from table to table.

'What do I want? It is not what I want. It is what your wyrd requires of you,' said Kva.

Bjorn let out a bitter laugh, halfway to the howl of misery of a wolf rejected by his pack.

'My wyrd asks a lot of me.'

'It will ask more of you. Much more,' said Kva sternly. He did not approve of Bjorn's self-pity.

Kva held out his hand in a fist, palm down. The power armour shook with palsy.

'Why?' said Bjorn in despair. 'Why must I be separated from my brothers? Why must I bear this burden? Why not a jarl, or a gothi? I am nothing.'

'This is why,' said Kva. He turned his hand upwards, and opened it.

Upon Kva's palm was a rune scorched into a wooden tile. The symbol had many meanings. While its mystic significance could be interpreted accurately only by the gothi, its mundane meaning was known by all the Vlka Fenryka.

Bear. It was the rune for bear.

Kva laid the rune on the table next to Bjorn's rough apotropaic eye.

'Tomorrow is the solstice, when Fenris is closest to the Wolfs Eye,' said Kva. 'Tomorrow, the door to the Underverse cracks ajar.'

Bjorn's eyes widened. Kva's ravaged features filled a world crowded with glowering spirit animals.

'You will come to the *Krakgard* with the primarch.'

'What?'

'Tomorrow.'

Bjorn lifted his head suddenly from the table, coming awake from a drunken stupor. Already, his oolitic kidney was purging the toxins from his blood, and his head was clear. The feast continued as it should, full of a warrior's joy at life. He blinked.

For a moment he thought he must have slept, for there was no sign of Kva in the hall, but his eye fell on the rune tile on the table, its scorched lines challenging him. Instinctively, Bjorn reached for his mjod horn. He raised it to his lips, but stopped, and slowly held it from him and poured the mjod away onto the floor.

Before he left, he scratched out the eye on the table.

They set out at dawn from the Sunrising Gate, as the Wolfs Eye was making its move against the world. The gate was only a third of the way up the Fang, but from the causeway leading down from the mountain the curve of the world was visible, and the Volda Hammarki bent across it like a brigandine of studded plates wrapped around a barrel-chested warrior. A rim of fire emerged over the peaks as the gates opened, white and vicious, an arc that filled a quarter of the horizon. So close was the sun during the Season of Fire that its edge lost constancy, and

writhed with the serpents of coronal ejection. A king standing over his defeated enemy the Wolfs Eye rose over Fenris, and the earth quaked in response. *Valdrmani*, the wolf moon, skulked on the opposite horizon, blanched by the sun's ferocity.

Storms sped over the lower mountains, lashing the slopes with vicious squalls. The snow of winter had gone, and all but the very largest glaciers were undergoing violent summer melts. Water raced through every gulley, brown as ale, whetting the blades of the mountain ridges with their erosive force. Lightning crackled around the mountaintops. All the while the earth shook and rumbled.

At Kva's command, Bjorn was first out into the morning, dressed in his tribal leathers. He squinted into the dazzling light of the home star. Though his occulobe compensated for the glare, he wore a pair of goggles made from slitted hide, and his view of the world was restricted to a narrow band.

Leman Russ strode past him without comment. An escort of ten Wolf Guard followed, led by Grimnr Blackblood. Then Kva at the head of a party of gothi. They were eight all told, the oldest and the most powerful of the Rune Priests, grizzled grey-hairs, their long fangs flashing ivory in the dawn.

None of them wore power armour. They were garbed like Bjorn in ritual leather gear and masks. Out of his battleplate, Kva was all but helpless, and was carried by his twin guardians in a chair fashioned from *mammot* ivory. Plates of bone and horn dangled from every neck, wrist and waist, carved with potent runes of protection.

Russ stopped at the brink of the causeway and drew in a deep breath. The air was dry and warm. In the lower reaches the temperature would be as high as the tropical norms of Old Earth, even at the pole. At the equator it rose so high as to be dangerous to human life. 'A fine summer's day,' said Russ.

Kva's bearers brought him to a halt by the king.

'The beginning of the end,' said Kva. 'At midnight, Fenris begins his journey away from the Wolfs Eye. He has warmed his hands too close to the fire, and snatches them back. Winter will follow shortly after.'

Russ looked over the planetary violence with an approving eye. 'This is a hard world. This is our world,' he said.

'As it is in body, so it is in spirit,' said Kva. 'If it were not so hardened, we would not survive this undertaking.' He shook his staff. The wolfs teeth and bone fetishes rattled. 'Downwards,' he said, 'to the Krakgard.'

From anywhere but the Fang, attaining the summit of the Krakgard would have meant an arduous ascent. But from the mountain housing the Aett every direction was down. The party moved in single file along the killing lanes of the Sunrising approach. As the group descended, the peaks of the Fang's brothers grew, from modest seeming crests to gargantuan masses of stone. That is, until Bjorn looked

behind, and beheld the endless majesty of the Fang itself, its great pyramidal form puncturing cloud and air. Through the clouds banking up against its eastern flank and the aurorae rippling over the summit, the lights of the fleet shone.

They left the main causeway soon after, heading down steps hewn from stone. Cairns of skulls - wolf and human - guarded the entries to the many landings. Niches carved into rock held small ivory figurines of past warriors. The path went into the deep valley dividing the Krakgard from the Fang. By way of a single stone arch without walls they crossed a river foamed with summer's flood two hundred metres below. For a while they walked in humid shade. Mosses and ferns grew everywhere, expending last year's hoarded energy to put forth shoots and seeds and hoard again before the ice returned. It was hot, and the air so wet from the river's vapour the Vlka's weapons beaded with condensation.

Thereafter the path turned upwards again, zig-zagging skywards through black crags.

The Krakgard was the Vlka Fenryka's funeral mount, and possessed by a brooding spirit whose voice whispered just below the breath of the hot summer winds. Not long after beginning their climb, the first of the paths leading to the tombs of mighty heroes broke away from the main road, and after that they appeared with regularity.

The party came presently to a hollow in the mountain, where the dirty tongue of a glacier pressed down from higher vales to lap at a tam. Blue icebergs floated in the water. Black scree paved the ground with sword-blade shards. By the lakeshore was a ritual space demarcated by poles of wood bleached grey and festooned with threads of Space Marine skulls. In the middle was set a pointed menhir as tall as Russ, crudely hewn to resemble the Fang.

At the shoulder of the ridge where the path turned downwards towards the tam, a wide platform was cut into the stone. It was enclosed by a low wall, and paved with slippery slabs. A hundred wolf skulls sat on the wall facing outwards. They were from blackmanes, the very largest breed. At the centre of the platform was a boulder as high as Bjorn's waist, polished smooth by years of human contact.

'The Wolf Guard will go back to the valley and await the primarch's return from the mountain by the bridge,' said Kva.

'We will not,' said Grimnr. His followers looked to one another uneasily. 'You cannot mean I should leave my primarch.'

'He does. Obey the Rune Priest, Grimnr,' said Russ. He sounded weary and tense, thought Bjorn. 'Obey his command as if it were my own.'

'And what of Bjorn?' said Grimnr, gesturing at him angrily.

'Bjorn will wait here as sentinel,' said Kva. He pointed at the boulder. 'You will sit upon the Rock of Vigilance, and face towards the Aett. Do not look into the corrie.' Kva moved to address them all. 'We gothi shall undertake a struggle of the

flesh and of the spirit that you cannot join. There are wards around this place. The skulls and the stone shall protect you, Bjorn. Do not leave them for any reason. You must not look into the corrie.'

'How am I to play witness if I cannot watch?' said Bjorn gruffly.

'Yes, why does he get to stay, and we, the Wolf Guard, are sent away?' demanded Blackblood.

'He is to be the herald of failure,' said Kva to Blackblood. 'Do you wish to take this burden from him? His is an ill wyrd. You may share it, if you want.'

Blackblood scowled, his single eye turning flinty. He spat on the stone. 'No,' he said.

'Then you will wait at the bottom,' said Kva. He turned back to Bjorn. 'If Lord Russ does not return, it is you who shall take back the tidings of his loss.'

'How will I know?'

'If he does not return by sunset, you will know. You will look away,' said Kva. 'I do not care what you hear. You must not turn back, or any ill that befalls us will befall you too, and through you, the Legion. If we are to fail, you must take the news back to the Aett. That is your task, no more. Wait until evening. Never look into the corrie, no matter what happens. Do not look!'

'If that is my wyrd, that is what I shall do,' said Bjorn, 'though I do not wish to have this fate.'

'It is your wyrd, Bjorn the Fell-Handed,' said Kva, 'and I am sorry that it is so, but the Allfather's weaving makes no allowance for personal feeling.'

'One-Handed,' insisted Bjorn. He looked up fiercely, his temper finally breaking. He had had his fill of the gothi's inscrutable pronouncements. 'I am the One-Handed.' He slapped the stump of his left arm. 'Why must you call me Fell-Handed? Is it some kind of bad jest?'

Kva gave him a guarded look. 'Because it is your name, Bjorn, It was braided into your wyrd the moment you were born, follow your thread a little further, and you shall see that it is what you are truly named.'

'Are we done?' growled Russ impatiently.

'We are, my jarl,' said Kva.

'Then, Grimnr, to the foot of the stair,' commanded Russ.

Grumbling, the huscarl directed his warriors away from the platform. Russ stared at Bjorn until the warrior took his place upon the stone, and had turned away from the corrie.

One by one the gothi filed past, Kva in his chair going first. Russ went last. He nodded at Bjorn as he went by.

Bjorn listened to the clack of the gothi's bone charms dwindling into the distance. Russ' heavy tread followed. In the vale of the Krakgard sound was

weirdly amplified - Russ' footsteps were as loud as an artillery barrage creeping over a battlefield.

Hot wind stirred Bjorn's beard. His stump ached. He wished for his lightning claw to hide his maiming.

He wished for a great many things.

TWELVE

Syrtyr's Breath

A U-shaped valley snaked down from the corrie, terminating suddenly in a vertiginous drop half a kilometre away, a legacy of harder glaciations and past tectonic upheavals. Framed by its end were the forests and plains around the Volda Hammarki. The valley funnelled storm breezes that chased themselves up the mountain vale as a hot, steady wind.

The reduced group made their way to the ritual circle. It was set on a nub of hard volcanic rock, different in type to the surrounding slate. At the centre was a slight dimple, not apparent from the platform overlooking the tarn. From within shone a yellow light. Smoke rose up and blew across the ground, splitting apart on the sharp stones. The menhir carved to resemble the Fang stood guard over the hole, its belly tinted orange by the world fire.

Leman Russ walked over to the hole. The smell of hydrogen sulphide made him turn his face aside. He could not look directly down the hole for long. When he did, heat curled his hair, and beat him back. He stepped away with a brief impression of infinite depth, and the world forge churning in the world's heart.

Kva had his twin guardians carry him to the edge of the ritual circle.

'That is Syrtyr's Door, the soul forge, the entrance to his kingdom of the dead.'

'I have not seen it before,' said Russ.

'You have seen the cavity.'

'I have passed it, yes. It is a circle of skulls with a crack in the rock, no more remarkable than any of the Krakgard's sights. I paid it no attention,' said the primarch. 'This is a place for gothi's business.'

'Often the mysterious is hidden in plain sight. Syrtyr's Door is active only on this day,' Kva shifted in the chair. 'In one respect, it is a volcanic vent of unusual properties. A geological oddity. In another respect, it is a door to the Underverse. What do you, oh son of the Emperor, believe it to be?'

Russ stared at the hole which led to the glowing heart of the world. He understood the volcanic processes which could lead to this unusual phenomenon well enough. The rational explanation. Then he looked to his gothi, and the skulls and the runes, and he knew in his heart what it truthfully was.

'It is the entrance to the Underverse,' he said.

Kva nodded. 'There is ice, there is fire, water, and air, and spirit…' He pointed his staff at the glacier, the vent, the tarn, the sky and Leman Russ. 'And there is earth.' At the pronouncement of this word, the twin guardians lowered Kva to the ground. The feet of his chair touched the stone. He drew strength from it and his disability seemed less pronounced. 'The elements of Fenris are together in balance in this place. You embody its soul. Only you can make this journey. It can only be done now, and it can only be done with our help.'

He gave two sharp rattles of the bones on his staff. The gothi arranged themselves into a circle between the poles and their necklaces of skulls. Russ stared at Kva. No trace of a Librarian of the Legiones Astartes was evident in this man, nor in any of the others. They were pagan priests, rune casters, ice shamans.

Kva cracked his staff upon the stone three times. On the fourth strike, the other gothi began to hammer the butts of their staves into the ground. In time with their slow rhythm, they chanted. First one began to sing, then the next, and so on until all seven of them repeated hypnotic phrases timed with the striking of their staffs that overlaid and interwove with each other as intricately as knotwork.

'Fenris is at its perigee,' said Kva. 'It is the solstice, the absolute height of summer. Hearken to me, Lord of Winter and War. Within the Underverse you will encounter uncanny beings. Wights, and worse. Dealing with these beings requires the focus and poise of a duel. Never let your guard down. You may drink of their mjod and ale, but take none of their wight's meat, or you will be lost in the Underverse forever. Answer no questions lest they snare you in their webs of deceit. Treat them nobly, as you would a mortal lord, and they will provide what you wish to learn, though you may not like the answers, and there will be a cost. Come to me.'

Russ walked over to the crippled priest's chair. The chanting of the other gothi made him woozy, and he walked unsurely, like he had stepped onto dry land from the rocking deck of a ship after a long, rough voyage.

Kva gestured to him. Russ bent low.

'More than anything, remember, my lord, what you are,' whispered Kva, so quietly no other could have heard.

Russ nodded. 'I am Leman Russ.'

'No,' said Kva. *'This* is who you are,' and he spoke a name Russ had never heard into his ear, a name he knew without being told had been intended for him, before he had been stolen away from Terra.

The name affected him. Russ' ears buzzed. He stood tall in wonder, head spinning. Kva's ruined face filled his world.

'Remember that you are more than a wolf. Are you ready?'

'Yes,' he said.

'Go to the door and look within.'

Russ walked somnolently to the vent. The heat made him hesitate. 'Stare into it,' said Kva. 'Do not fear the heat. The ice in your soul will protect you.'

In a state of detachment he put his head over the hole, full into the rush of hot gases. His skin prickled prior to roasting. He felt his body rally itself to repair the damage. He burned, but as quickly as he burned, he healed. It was nevertheless agonising.

'There can be no gain without suffering,' said Kva. 'Everything given by the Underverse requires a sacrifice. Do you accept this, my jarl?'

'I do!' said Leman Russ through gritted teeth. The chanting of his priests mingled with the pulse of pain afflicting his face. He was lightheaded from holding his breath against the burning gases.

'Then breathe deeply of Syrtyr's breath, and fare well. You and I shall not meet again in this life.'

Russ hesitated only for an instant before he filled his lungs with searing air. His mouth burned, his throat burned. His lungs wilted. The chants of the priests droned louder than battle's noise, and Russ thought he had been tricked, and would die, a victim of the witches he had naively fostered.

The vent in the ground rushed towards him, gaping like a maw, and Leman Russ fell from this world into some other place.

Syrtyr's Door had opened.

Winter footsteps make a particular sound. The crunch-squeak of air in compressing snow, the shush-slide of feet displacing delicate crystals. It is the sound of peace. It is the sound of death. Death to be out in inimical seasons when more sensible creatures sleep. Peace to be had in the emptiness of the world, where a man might be one and alone under the vaults of creation with nothing to trouble him. There are no boundaries between life and death in a landscape like that. They lose their divide. It is an easy landscape to learn from, equally easy to vanish in, to let the body cool and the soul rise. An easy landscape to give in to.

Russ knew the sound of winter footsteps as well as his heartbeats.

Whiteness faded to blue gloom. His mouth popped open, and he sucked in a gusting breath. Lungs that had burned now froze with painful air. His eyes were already open, for their moist surface was chilled by the cold. As if some enchantment were lifted, now they saw.

The footsteps were his. He was walking across a crisp snowfield, his feet plunging through the crusted surface to the powder beneath. Each step buried his legs to the knee. He slowed, and stopped.

The field of night lit the world a subtle blue. A billion ice crystals winked at a billion stars in cosmic flirtation.

Leman Russ turned around on the spot. Though he had heard his footsteps and felt his forward motion, there were no tracks leading to where he stood. Snow lay

undisturbed on the flat plain. In every direction the hard blue-white horizons met the blue-black sky at an uncompromising edge. Cold bit at his shins like iron. Cold raked his lungs like claws. The stars were alien, the chill deeper than the deadliest Fenrisian night. Were it not for his primarch's body he would be dead already.

Russ had learned at the side of the Emperor. There were no gods, no real magic, no dream quests or visions. These things, where experienced, were manifestations of the warp filtered by the human consciousness. They were not in an objective sense real. There were the sciences of the mind, there were the sciences of the soul. This was the Imperial Truth as He taught it.

Before the Emperor, Russ had learned at the feet of gothi. He was raised with a belief in wights and ghosts, where *kaboldr* and *imgr* crept from the Underverse to add supernatural peril to a world already crammed with mortal dangers. In that belief system, such places as Russ now travelled were as real as the waking world, and far more deadly.

Alone in the snowfield, Russ knew what he believed. Russ had seen too many supposedly unreal things that had proved to be all too real. He was wise enough to know that whether something was real or not was irrelevant The better question was, could it kill him?

Kva had said yes. Kva was rarely wrong.

The bums he had suffered at the door were gone His ritual leathers were missing, and he was dressed in a suit of skins from many wolves, inexpertly cut and stitched to fit his giant's body, their tails dangling from odd places. It was a mockery of a chieftain's garb. The sort the trickster wore in the saga tellings. He noted that well.

Not that it mattered. Nothing would, if he didn't get out of the cold.

Constellations of runes joined star to star. When he looked askance, he could see the lines between, drawn in starlight, but when he moved to better see they vanished back into the dark. One collection he recognised, a jumble of marks that, if looked at in a certain way, defined the outline of a Gloriana-class void ship. This too vanished when he looked too hard. *His own*, he wondered, or *Horus'*?

A single, drawn-out howl sounded to his left. Russ whirled, clouds of ice smoke issuing from his mouth as profusely as that from snow drake.

A lone wolf sat far away, close to the horizon. Its black pelt blended with the night sky behind it. Even with his primarch's eyes, Russ could barely see it. A flash of white teeth and yellow eyes, and it headed away.

Russ' face set. Without a second thought, he broke into a running pursuit. The arctic wastes went on for leagues. The wolf ran hard, and Russ pounded after, never falling behind yet never gaining either. The air burned his lungs. The back of his throat tasted of chilled copper. The insides of his nostrils crackled and

stung, all the moisture frozen from them. He yanked a wolf tail from his motley suit and clamped it in his teeth. It tasted rank, stank of musk and was soon covered in ice from his breathing, but it stopped his lungs from turning into blocks of frozen meat.

On he ran, never faltering. His feet numbed in his boots. His gloveless hands cramped into claws. He did not stop. Ahead of him the wolf loped onwards. Glimmering crystals burst from its every footfall, but its feet did not sink into the snow and it left not a trace of its passing. Russ, in comparison, stumbled often, his feet swallowed by unseen dips. More than once he blundered into snow that came up to his chest. When it seemed the wolf would vanish ahead, the deeper snow would end, and Russ would stumble forwards, cursing the ways of all priests between ragged pants. For hours they ran. The light never changed. The sun did not rise.

Finally, as his lungs burned like molten metal and his extremities felt the early gnawing of frostbite, a yellow light appeared over the horizon. Russ was too exhausted to cheer. He pushed himself on in the trail of the wolf all the harder.

The wolf slowed. The light split into two, then three, then more becoming many small windows in the low walls of a chieftain's longhouse. Like an upturned wolf boat fifty metres long, its roof swelled generously in the middle, tapering towards either end, where crossed angular posts tipped with carven wolves' heads made frames to support the central beam. A thick covering of snow hid the shingles of the roof, and lay piled in delicate towers upon the posts. Light poured from a smokehole, and from the open gates fires cast a great yellow trapezium of light upon the ground.

Slowing further, the wolf approached, and as it neared it lost some of the form of a wolf. With a bound it skipped from four to two legs, its forelimbs changing shape and becoming like the arms of a man. In the next few steps its shoulders broadened, its rear legs lengthened. In all other respects it remained a wolf, hirsute, so dark it looked like a shadow upon the light patch of snow. Its hands were clawed, and though it walked upright, the hind legs retained a wolf's configuration of hock, stifle and pastern.

The man-wolf howled to announce its presence, and swaggered into the hall.

Russ jogged up. He could not see beyond the light within. Despite the killing cold, the windows were unshuttered, as though the hall's master was enjoying the few gentle days of a Fenrisian spring before the summer of the Wolfs Eye cast all into ruin.

Russ held up his hands to his eyes to shade them, but could see no better into the light.

There was only one course of action open to him.

Leman Russ set his shoulders and strode within the hall.

THIRTEEN

The Court Of The Erlking

Inside, the hall was clingy as any human dwelling. The brilliant light seen without vanished as soon as Russ stepped through the gates into the single room. Two rows of posts delineated a large central space, with shadowed aisles down either side. A huge pile of coals upon a slab of stone in the centre crackled with the slow dying of fires. Torches in iron sconces attached to the posts provided inconstant light that hardly supplemented the red glow of the hearth.

The room was full of man-wolves as large as legionaries.

At long tables sat hundreds of them, gnawing on glistening roasts that smelled of man flesh and drinking soured mjod from leaden lanxes. Ranks of hairy backs hunched over their meals. Many wore leather harness, a few coats of mail. Their weapons were leant together in neat conical stacks at the ends of each table, and they were huge and brutal, though the man-wolves surely did not require weapons; their teeth and claws would be sufficient to kill a great white bear.

The odour of kennels assailed Russ' nose. The smell was similar to that in the Aett at a gathering of the Great Companies, but far stronger and with an elusive odour of sickness, as of animals confined too long and grown distempered from it.

At the head of the hall was a dais upon which was another table, this one set transversely. In a hall of men, the space behind the high table would be screened off into separate rooms to quarter the jarl and his family, but this was no human hall and there were no rooms. The floor was ice, not earth covered with reeds. There were no domestic tools or utensils. No weavings to block the cold. No skins to rest on. Gnawed bones were piled where, in the Verse, children would sit to listen to the stories of their elders. The walls were scored with claw marks. There was no comfort in this Underverse aett, only meat, ice and fire.

The king of this place was a great black wolf bigger than all the others, so massive he barely fit in his throne, and hulked over the table as if on the verge of hurling it in rage. He ignored the primarch, and conferred with his jarls through mouthfuls of bloody flesh. On the board before him and his warriors was a long wooden platter. Already mostly consumed, the animal that provided this lord's meat was obvious from the delicate finger bones picked clean and piled upon the wood, and the long, flat shape of the body.

In front of the table lay a sleeping wolf of the more usual kind, though even by the standards of Fenris it was enormous. Like all the other wolves in the room, it was ill-defined, as if composed of shadow and not of flesh.

The sole thing of any craftsmanship within the room was a great spear held horizontally to the wall behind the king by a pair of iron brackets.

The Spear of the Emperor. Russ' own accursed weapon.

Russ strode up to the fire. When dealing with wights and fell beings a man should never display fear. The truth of this had been shown to the primarch many times.

He stood by the fire pit. The man-wolves ignored him. They continued their feasting, biting and rending at their meal, crunching upon hands crabbed from roasting. Rib bones broke between flashing teeth. When two wolves reached for the same morsel they snapped and snarled at one another. Violence was a moment away.

'My lord!' shouted Russ.

No attention was paid him. It was as if he were not there.

He looked around at the hunched beast-men, threw back his head, and howled. The power of his call was magnified many times in that uncanny hall. The timbers shook. Snow slumped from the roof. The fire died back.

Their attention was his. Silence fell. A hundred pairs of yellow eyes stared at him from the gloom.

The giant king stood, thrusting his granite throne backwards with ease.

'Who is this who comes into my hall and makes the call of challenge?' He spoke in rumbling juvjk, the hearth language of Fenris.

A coal in the fire cracked. A patch of embers collapsed in on themselves, sending up sparks that fled for the smokehole.

'I am Leman of the Russ, Lord of Winter and War, the Great Wolf, primarch of the Vlka Fenryka that men call Space Wolves, the Sixth Legion of Terra, master of Fenris in the Verse, and son of the Emperor of Mankind. I beg your indulgence, lord. The night is cold, and I have travelled far. Could I stay a while and rest? I call upon the law of hospitality.'

'*You* are a king?'

'I am,' said Leman Russ.

'Such poor tailoring is unfit for a king,' said the wolf, holding up his hand to gesture at Russ' clothes. 'And you are no wolf. See the false wolf, walking on two feet!' he mocked.

The warriors laughed, a barking cacophony full of threat.

'Do you know who I am, mortal?' Russ smiled openly, though within his skull he was thinking quickly. Every word he said must be weighed. Speaking poorly could trap him there forever. 'One of your names is the Erl king. You are the lord

of wights and of the *alvar*, the god of the *nettagangr*. This is the *Muspjall*, the hall of those who die deaths that serve no one. Those slain by age serve at your tables, and here cowards are devoured.'

The wolf nodded approvingly. 'I am that and many other things,' he said. His pink tongue flopped clumsily in his jaws as it formed human words. Growling further roughened his speech, which was wet and throaty to begin with. 'Here I am the Great Wolf, like you. Leman of the Russ, I have many names, and that title belongs to me more than it belongs to you. I say thee begone. You have no place in my hall, creature of the Verse. This is my domain. Go out and freeze.'

His retainers snarled.

'Hearthlaw demands you accept me king to king,' shouted Russ confidently over their growling. 'We are not at feud. I come here unarmed and in openness. Deny my right to warmth, and you will bring a bad cast upon your wyrd. This is code in the Underverse as it is in the lands above.'

The Great Wolf growled. A retainer wearing antlers and draped with charms tapped his arm, and the wolf bent low so that it might whisper into his ear.

'My gothi tells me you speak truly. Sit then, join my warriors, if you dare. You will not live long here. They are not welcoming of human company.'

'I am no ordinary man,' said Russ.

'And yet you are still a man. Amarok! Make space for our guest.'

A wolf detached itself from the mass of the feasting shadows, and held out its arm in welcome indicating a space upon the bench. Russ went over. The wolf was his equal in height, bulging with muscle, though it seemed composed solely of smoky air, and had no certain features beyond its burning eyes, ivory teeth and lolling tongue.

'You rudely followed me to this hall,' said the wolf named Amarok. 'Enjoy the rewards for your stalking.'

Grumbling man-wolves made space. Russ took his place at the table.

'Take meat,' said Amarok, thrusting a wooden platter at Russ. Upon it was a man's leg, bent in half at the knee and charred.

'I shall not,' said Russ.

Shadow wolves snarled and yipped at each other, their language too uncouth for Russ to comprehend.

'You insult us?' said Amarok. 'Is our food not good enough for the king?'

'On the contrary,' said Russ humbly. 'I honour you. I have taken advantage enough already. Your lord grants me shelter, it is all I require. Your warriors are strong, I would see them stronger still. I will not deprive them of their meat.'

'Then at least drink,' said Amarok. 'Refuse this, and we shall kill you for the insult to our hospitality.' A lanx was pushed at him. It was made of hammered

lead, with childlike representations of wolves scratched into the rim by claw tips. The workmanship was crude beyond belief.

Dark mjod filled the drinking bowl to the brim. Its surface sparkled with frost. The liquid did not move, being frozen through and through to the bowl.

'I thank you,' he said, and lifted the lanx to his mouth. He bit hard, his sharp teeth shearing through lead and ice. He chewed both, and swallowed. The lead was bitter. The mjod was chilled colder than the depths of the void, and burned his throat, but he smiled.

'A good mjod,' he said.

The shadow wolves laughed growling laughs. Amarok's brow wrinkled with malevolent humour.

'You appear to be having trouble with your refreshment. Allow me to help you.'

Amarok snatched a torch from the post behind him, and held it over the bowl. With supernatural rapidity, the ice melted, and the surface of the mjod churned with miniature waves. Russ raised the lanx again. Amarok followed the bowl with the torch so that it singed Russ' hair. The mjod thrashed and bubbled, steaming now. Russ raised it to his lips and drank, and drank, and drank. The mjod was boiling hot. Its fumes pushed up his nose and made his eyes stream. Still he drank, ignoring the pain.

He set it down with a gasp. Amarok looked at him with wide eyes and bared teeth. All Russ' great efforts had succeeded in lowering the level of the mjod by a finger's width, but it amazed the shadow wolf nonetheless.

'You… you drank,' it growled. 'You have supped enough to make the level drop.'

'Most refreshing,' said Russ. He belched appreciatively.

Amarok recovered. 'Then drink more.'

'Oh, I thank you but no. I have had my fill. Such a marvellous lanx could sate the hersirs of four aetts. Your generosity knows no bounds - for this I am thankful, and will sing the praises of your tribe in the lands of above.' He ran his finger over the section he had bitten away. 'I am sorry about the bowl's edge, it was a pretty thing.'

The shadow wolves laughed, all except Amarok.

'You insult me!' he snarled, and lunged for Russ.

The primarch backhanded the wolf across the muzzle as casually as if he were chastising one of his own animals. Amarok tumbled backwards with a yelp, rolled into a crouch and prepared to leap.

'Enough!' roared the Great Wolf. 'This man of the Russ is our guest, no matter how unwelcome. You offered him meat, he declined it politely in the proper form. You offered him drink, he imbibed his fill. He abides by the hearthlaw. You

cannot harm him, Amarok, or you risk expulsion from this place. You are a guest here, as much as he.'

Amarok's ears pressed against his skull, and he bowed his head, turning it to the side to expose his throat to his king.

'I recognise my failing and will be sure to correct it.'

Russ' skin crawled to see this malefic abomination display the customs of the Rout.

Tension receded a little. The Great Wolf barked out a command. Servants appeared from nowhere, whisking away the platters and bones of the feast. They were the shades of men and women of advanced years; the dead who had been slain by shameful age alone.

'If our guest is mighty enough to drink of our mjod, perhaps he would enjoy another challenge?'

'Most certainly,' replied Russ, and clapped his hands together. 'The nights here are long. I am sure you would appreciate the diversion.'

The shadow wolves howled with mirth, and banged their drinking horns and lanxes on the table boards.

'I am willing to provide this entertainment, in exchange for a boon,' said Russ.

'And what boon would you ask?'

'I will ask a question, and you must answer.'

'Very well,' said the Great Wolf. 'My wisdom is widely known. I think now you did not come to this hall by accident. Yet you have me intrigued, mortal. I will grant your request. Four tasks I will set you. Let us say the drinking of the mjod was the first, and that you have already failed. Three more await.'

'That is hardly fair. Had I known it as a mead-challenge I would have tried harder. I fail before I begin.'

The Great Wolf snarled. 'You seem weak, so I will be fair. Succeed at one of these tasks, and I shall grant your request. Fail them all, and you will remain here in my service forever.'

The challenge was fair, as custom demanded. Russ expected this mirroring of his own welcome to the Emperor, so many years ago. He wondered if he had appeared as savage as the Great Wolf to his father, that first time they had met.

'I will fight for you, if I fail,' said Russ.

The Great Wolf laughed, his warriors joined in.

'You are too feeble to join the murder-make with the enemies we face, little man! No, we require a fool to make my warriors laugh after their labours in battle. And, if you are unsuccessful in the task of mirth-bringing, you shall be devoured nightly, and remade to try again.'

'It does not sound so bad,' said Russ with a careless shrug. 'It is in a man's nature to wish to be of use.'

'So we have a bargain?'

'We have a bargain.'

The Great Wolfs teeth pulled back in a canine parody of a grin. 'Your jesting had better be good, Leman of the Russ. My teeth are sharp.'

The Great Wolf stood tall and raised his arms. He lifted the forefinger of his left hand and swept it downwards through the air. Russ drew in his breath at unanticipated pain. By some employment of Underverse sorcery, a wound like the stroke of a single claw opened upon his right breast.

'A first mark for the failure of the first challenge. Suffer four, and your soul is ours.'

The shadow wolves banged their drinking vessels upon the tables, playing an insistent rhythm.

'So then, the second challenge!'

The rhythm increased in tempo, its coordination tumbling apart. The shadow wolves howled. At the cacophony, the massive wolf before the high table twitched and rolled over in its sleep.

An old crone came limping out from among the tables. She was neither wolf nor shade, but a living being of flesh and blood, though greatly aged and infirm.

She tottered to a stop before Leman Russ and looked up at him with eyes milky with cataracts.

'This is my dam,' said the Great Wolf. 'The den mother, the far hunter, the worst killer of men. You shall wrestle hen. If you beat her, then you have won. If not, then you shall try the next challenge. Three bouts. If you are put down for five seconds you lost the point. Two points out of three is the winner.'

'Very well,' said Russ. He braced his fingers against one another and cracked his knuckles. Even he, the Emperor's executioner who had in the past done whatever was asked of him no matter how distasteful, balked at fighting an old woman. He reminded himself all this was wyrd-made, two steps from maleficarum. She was as much an old woman as he was a stone He adopted a wrestler's crouch. The crone was so budded with age her head came only as far as his waist.

'Are you ready?' he said. 'I will try to be gentle.'

The old woman gave him a toothless smile; then rushed him, moving so quickly he was caught entirely by surprise She locked her arms about his leg. Arms that looked as feeble as kindling possessed a terrifying strength. At her touch his flesh drilled, and the strength flowed from his leg. His knee budded. With a tremendous heave she flipped him over onto his back. Before he could get up, she sprang upon his chest and knelt upon him. A bag of feathers weighed more, and yet she crushed the breath from his lungs until he was gasping.

The wolves chanted, and Russ recognised in their growling speech the numbers used on Fenris, 'Fyf, for, tra, twa, onn!' They howled and yipped and banged their lanxes. Harassed looking wights drifted among them, topping up their drinks as quickly as they were spilled.

The old woman slipped off his chest so cautiously Russ thought she might stumble and break her wasted bones. 'First round to Mother Erla!' howled the Erlking. 'Again!'

The second time Leman Russ was better prepared. The old woman came at him with the same blinding speed. This time he caught her shoulders, and their arms locked. His calloused primarch's hands gripped shoulders no more substantial than sticks wrapped in paper, but in them was the fortitude of mountains. She pushed at him hard, stronger than a full-grown *konungur*. Russ pitted all his potency against the crone, but it was not enough. Again, the chill of ice and weakness crept into his limbs, starting in his biceps where she held him so viciously, and spreading to his bones and thence his organs. Deep aches plagued him. His joints locked. His vision dimmed. His legs trembled, and the woman forced him down to one knee, then the other, so that his eye-line was level with her gummy mouth. She released one of his enfeebled arms, grabbed him by the hair, and gently pushed his face down onto the iron-hard ice where she held him as the wolves counted down from five, banging out time with their lanxes and horns whether they were full or not.

Russ struggled to rise. The weight of a world was upon him, a cold world, composed of ice and hatred. Too much for any man to bear, primarch or not.

'You cannot beat her, you cannot beat her!' howled the Erlking. 'I tell you, you cannot win!' The hall erupted in gleeful yips. The old woman stepped back. Russ rose shakily to his feet. Bent double, his hands upon his knees, he gasped until his strength returned. When he looked up, the old woman was stood where she had begun her assault, her back stooped, her eyes blind, limbs trembling with age so that her fingers described tiny oscillations beyond her control. He should have been able to knock her down with a hard breath, and yet here he was, bested by a crone.

'See, my warriors, he is the best the Verse has to offer! Two out of three!'

The shadow wolves roared and howled with laughter.

'I tell you what little man,' said the Great Wolf through tears of mirth, 'before she lays you out on the ice again. If you can beat her this last time, I shall call you victorious. How is that for sport?' Russ nodded, barely able to speak. 'Good enough.'

The third time he moved first attacking with a baresarks fury. The old woman met him, her spindle limbs set against his. He pushed and strained until the sinews stood out on his neck. He might have pushed a mountain back with greater

ease. The crone would not budge and so Russ pushed all the harder. By dint of superhuman exertion, he forced the crone back half a step, bringing forth a gasp of amazement from the man-wolves. But the mightier the effort he exerted, the quicker his strength fled and this time, without the Erl-mother doing ought but hold him in place, he sank to the ground and the chanting of the wolves resumed its prior volume. His enfeebled fingers slipped from her arms, and Russ flopped to the floor, where he let out an involuntary groan.

The wolves laughed. The old crone hobbled away cackling. Or maybe she was weeping. Russ could not tell. His world was grey and its details hard to discern, and all pleasure was wrung out from it.

Slowly, he recovered, getting into a crouch, and then shakily to his feet. Not quite the full measure of his strength returned. His hair fell across his eyes, and he noticed a fresh band of grey shot through the copper-blond.

'Fetch him mjod!' growled the Erlking. 'Honour our guest for his entertainment.'

A shadow wolf loped to the primarch, slopping mjod from a horn held in a clumsy, half-human grip. Russ snatched the vessel and downed the contents in one.

'So, another challenge failed.' The Erlking did not move; but a second claw stroke opened in Russ' flesh, and bled freely into his musty furs. The cut was deep. Russ did not flinch, but growled.

'Your third challenge; oh lord of wights,' said Russ.

'Yes, yes, the third challenge!' one of the Erlking's hersirs bayed. The wolves broke into a chorus of howls that degenerated into cruel laughter.

'A simple one. You see the beast before my throne?'

Russ looked at the giant wolf asleep in front of the dais. 'I do.'

'You must move him, that is all,' said the Erlking, 'by cunning or by brute strength, it matters not, simply move him. To the left, to the right, back or forwards. You choose.'

'Very well,' said Russ.

He walked to the head of the beast and stared down at it. His wolf-brothers, Freki and Geri, would have reacted instinctively to his presence, knowing what he needed from them without the primarch performing so much as a finger twitch. This affinity extended to all Fenrisian wolves. They instinctively knew he was a lord of rare power, and deferred to him accordingly.

The Erlking's wolf remained resolutely asleep.

'Wolf!' said Russ. 'I ask you to move.'

The wolf did not so much as twitch.

Russ grumbled. He went to the high table and took up a coward's greasy limb, and dangled it in front of the wolf's great head.

'Wolf! Come wolf, move!' he said.

The wolf's nostrils flared. A paw twitched. It did not wake.

Russ threw down the blackened arm and wiped his hands on his suit of pelts.

'Right then,' he said. 'We'll do it the other way.'

The thing was huge. The biggest Fenrisian wolves grew to be the size of battle tanks. This pet of the Erlking's was only a little more modest than they, stretching four metres nose to rump.

Russ stared at its belly, flexing with the slow breaths of sleep. It was not going to be easy, no matter how simple the task appeared.

'A wolf of that size should be no trouble at all for the mighty Leman Russ,' said the Erlking. 'If you can but move him, you will triumph. Careful now, your chances dwindle.'

Russ grunted. He wiped his hands again, then shoved them under the belly of the wolf.

Fur enveloped him. It was soft as a woman's breath, warm as a good spring day. He pushed under the beast until his forearms were completely beneath it, and shoved.

Asleep, the wolf was a deadweight, as heavy and boneless as a water resupply sac for a void ship. Russ could not move it at all.

He tried again. His face reddened. A grunt of effort escaped his lips. If this were a mortal wolf, he would have been able to heave the thing onto his shoulders and shift it without breaking a sweat. But like the old woman before, the wolf was as immovable as Asaheim itself.

Russ stood straight, and shook black hairs from his arms. The wolf had not stirred throughout the whole of his attempt.

'Do you yield?' said the Erlking.

'Not yet,' said Russ. 'I am just warming up.'

'Why not try his paw to begin with?' said the Erlking. 'Where the foot goes, the rest will follow.' The man-wolves laughed. 'Though remember, I said move him a foot, not move his foot.'

Russ shot him a black look, then went to the rear of the wolf. The wolf's back legs were crossed. He eyed the uppermost paw, then spat upon his hands, rubbed them together and slid them around the leg away from the sensitive pads. He bent his legs, preparing to lift. He took in a deep breath, focused, and heaved.

He could not budge it. The paw was no bigger than a feasting plate, but heavier than a Land Raider.

Back straining, Russ pulled at the paw. His face turned crimson to the roots of his hair. He let out a bellow of frustration.

The paw shifted from the ground, creeping upwards fractions of an inch at a time. 'A fine feat!' shouted the Erlking. 'Now you must move the rest of him.'

The wolves laughed and banged their implements on the tables. Russ heaved harder, pushing from his legs, the muscles in his back on the verge of tearing. Up the paw went, past Russ' knees, then past the top of his thighs. Slow as a glacier inching its way down the mountains into the sea, Russ drew himself upright. His teeth were damped, knuckles of his interlaced fingers white, until he had the leg high off the ground.

At this disturbance to its slumber the wolf shivered, and pushed out its paw, sending Russ flying backwards with such force he cracked the post he landed against. On breath ragged with the effort, he tasted blood.

The shadow wolves roared out their appreciation.

Russ picked himself up. The wolves' laughter fell back into a cacophony of howling. Russ wiped blood from his lips with the back of his hand.

The Erlking pointed at the primarch. His long tongue hung like a wet flag out of the side of his mouth, yet his words were clear.

'A good effort, but you have failed again. Take your mark.'

The Erlking swiped his paw through the air, and again burning pain crossed Russ' chest so that there were three deep furrows clawed through his wolf pelts and his flesh. The blood would not stop as it should, and his furs were sodden with his vitae.

'Three marks against you. Bah, I declare your life is forfeit. My hersirs, my jarls, prepare for another course in our feasting!'

A hundred shadow wolves stood at once, upsetting their benches in their haste to be on their feet. Some snatched up their weapons with no care for the others in the piles, knocking them noisily down, while the rest exposed their teeth. They waited to pounce.

Russ considered fighting them, ripping as many of the Hel-kin down as he could before they tore his soul to pieces. The wolf in his heart bayed for that outcome.

Kva's words echoed in his ears.

'Remember, my lord, what you are. Remember that you are more than a wolf.'

'Wait!' he shouted. His protest was lost in the rumpus. 'Wait!' He bellowed so forcefully his shout knocked back the shadow wolves. They bristled, and shrank from him. 'What, my lord, of this fourth task?'

'You cannot win it,' said the Erlking dismissively. 'You have proved yourself unworthy. I retract the offer. My warriors, we feast on godling's flesh tonight!'

The shadow wolves drew nearer again.

'I demand my right to perform the fourth task!' Russ said.

The Erlking snarled. 'If you will. Name the four things that I challenged you with.'

Russ grinned. 'This is the easy part,' he said.

'Not so easy,' insisted the Erlking. 'The others you failed. You will prove as unwise as you are weak.'

Russ laughed. 'We shall see.' He swept his arm out behind him to where he had supped with the shadow wolves. 'Your guest Amarok bade me drink his bowl dry. How could I succeed in draining that lanx, when he had me attempt to swallow the Savage Sea? First, as ice, when frozen in the Helwinter, then when molten in the Fimbolsommer. He held the Wolf's Eye itself to my head in pretence of help, and yet I did not burn.'

The Great Wolf's expression set. 'Very good. You have guessed well once. You will not again. Be ready my wolves, to rend this false wolf and gulp down his flesh.'

Russ gave a confident smile. 'We shall see,' he said. 'The old woman. She is Bad Wyrd, a foe no man can beat, the fate of those who do not fall in battle. Age slaughters every warrior in the end, if he does not sleep upon the red snow. Is the Muspjall not her domain, staffed as it is by her victims?'

The Great Wolf growled.

'Your wolf, your pet. Why! What fool do you take me for?' He pointed at the sleeping monster. 'That is none other than Morten himself, the greatest wolf of all, and lord of the lowest of death's halls.'

The wolf looked up. Two heads, not one regarded Russ with piercing eyes. One mouth yawned capaciously, then it settled back down to sleep.

'No man can move death,' said Russ. 'It is a point we all must come to, and it cannot be dislodged by mortal effort. There! In naming the three of your challenges I win the fourth. They were not fair, you sought to deceive me. The deceiver is always undone.'

The Great Wolf laughed. It began as a wet, grumbling noise, the growl of a predator warning a hunter from its kill, rising to become the clashing of pack ice loosed by the burning sun. It finished as peals of thunder cracking around an erupting volcano's peak.

'Not so, Leman of the Russ. Now you must name me. Here you shall assuredly fail.'

Russ smiled broadly and stabbed a finger at the being. 'You are the Great Wolf. You are me.' And then he spoke the name Kva had whispered in his ear, a name he had never borne, but that encapsulated who he was. 'I know you by your spear. My spear.'

A hot wind blew.

'No!' The wolf howled in anguish, and all his shadow wolves howled with him. 'No!' Its shadow skin writhed and turned in on itself. It grew larger, more hulking, more bestial.

With a howl that shook the stars, the wolf leapt over the table. Russ sidestepped and caught it at throat and crotch, using its own momentum to pitch it over his head and send it crashing into the fire pit. Burning coals burst everywhere as the wolf yowled in the fire, its shadow fur ablaze. His warriors writhed as if they too were alight. They shredded on the air like smoke on the breeze, and blew upwards, whirling away through the smokehole towards the steely stars. When the wolves were gone, the shades of the aged servants sped after, stretching like dough, their grotesquely elongated faces shrieking.

The hall followed its occupants into the sky. First the furniture fell upwards, rattle-banging into the rafters and shaking loose the shingles. A bench rammed itself across the smokehole, battering repeatedly at it, knocking the space wider and wider. Splinters of wood rained down. Another bench slammed into it, then another, stoppering the hole like debris in a storm drain, until the first bench shattered under the pressure and the others followed, folding in on themselves with dry-branch cracks. A table came apart as it spun madly upwards. Tableware scythed the air like shrapnel. Russ dodged flying crocks and drinking horns. Bloody human bones bounced from his head. A spinning chair caught him a hard blow on the temple and he stumbled. Other tables joined the frantic airborne jig. They rose and fell and danced about before a sudden force hurled them up, where they smashed against the roof and crashed apart and the fragments flew upwards into the sky. A beam dislodged and fell, ringing off the ice with an idiophone's musical impact. Shingles tore from their pegs. Rafters bent themselves in half and shot skywards. The remaining furniture made for these new holes and easier freedom. The boards of the walls shook and wrenched themselves from the ground. Snow burst within, though in truth so little remained of the hall it could no longer be said to enclose a space. The great wolf-headed posts and the timbers of the A-frames were last to go, shaking with such great violence to free themselves from the earth that two exploded into yellow splinters, and the others cracked and sundered with wooden screams as they struggled from their holes.

The Great Wolf stood blazing in its own hearth. It clawed at itself, ripping its flesh in its agony so gravely that skin split in twain from the crown of its head to its belly and sloughed away into the growing fire. A human figure stepped from the ruin into the maelstrom of wood splinters and howling immaterial winds.

Russ crouched in readiness to leap as the whirlwind lessened. The last fragments of the hall sped away. Upon the plain of snow were Russ, his host and the great wolf Morkai, still sleeping as if nothing had occurred. Behind the death wolf the Spear of the Emperor flew from the remnants of the disintegrating wall and impaled the ground, the shaft pointing to the stars. The shadow wolves were gone, and their hall so thoroughly disassembled it was as if neither they nor the

building had ever been. The hearthstone alone remained to attest to its existence, the last embers upon it burning themselves out.

The figure steamed. Blood obscured its face and garb. It took a step closer to Russ. He stepped back. Adrenal compounds and other, more esoteric chemicals swelled his muscles.

The being took another step. The blood flickered off him, as if it were shadow and he had simply stepped into the sunlight, and he was revealed.

Russ was confronted with a version of himself. This one had none of the barbaric trappings of Fenrisian life. No wolf pelts or charms, no tattoos. His hair was cropped in a short, military style to match the smart grey uniform he wore. His clothes were perfectly made but undecorated save for a pair of collar studs fashioned in the shape of the numeral VI.

'So you spoke the truth of it, now see the truth of it,' said the false Russ. His teeth were flat and square like a normal man's. He had none of Leman Russ' fangs.

'What are you?' said Russ.

'Like this? I am you, as you named me. A version of you that could have been, were you not brought to the world of winter and wolves. I am you, shaped by another world and another father.'

'A Terran Leman Russ,' said Russ. He looked at himself in wonder. The man was the same as him, but utterly different. Only the cold light of his blue eyes, hard as a winter's sky, was the same.

'We both know that is not our name.'

'You are as I should have been,' said Russ.

The false Russ displayed his human teeth in a perfect smile, as if lecturing a student who had, in their naivety, said something foolish but amusing.

'I did not say that. I appear to you as you supposed you should have been, not necessarily as wyrd demanded. Has it never occurred to you that you are as you were intended to be?'

'I was stolen away,' said Leman Russ. 'I was taken from my father's laboratories along with my brothers.'

'Were you?' The false Russ smiled. 'The primarch-executioner arriving here on this harsh world of wolves? A being whose genetic gift meshes perfectly with the strain of mankind found here? This playground world of sagas and ancient stories made real, welcoming a hero to rule it?' He laughed softly, a guttural purr that remembered sharp teeth and claws and diets of hot, raw meat. 'Do you not think any of that is odd, or, dare I say it, convenient?'

'It is a saga-happenstance,' said Russ. 'All the tales of heroes are full of them. It is history shaped to fit the needs of story. Our lives are no different. Are we not

the heroes of this age? My biographers will doubtless prune away the bits that do not fit.'

'You are dangerously arrogant.'

'So some have said.'

'I think you mock me. If you do, you mock yourself.'

'I do mock you,' said Russ, 'as I mock myself. I am a weapon, made by the Emperor. No more, no less. I am no demigod, no hero from a tale.'

'Later tales will remember you as such.'

'It is not my place to judge those who come after. A tloods speak for him. You cannot petition the myth-makers of the future to respect you, or acknowledge you existed at all. They will, or they won't.'

'So, all this is a coincidence? This world, your name, your Legion's habits, your manner?'

'If you like,' said Russ.

'There are no such things as coincidences,' said the false Russ.

'Someone I knew used to say that a lot. He came to a bad end. It is also said there are no wolves on Fenris. Neither of these things are true.'

'Yet both of them are.'

'Maybe,' said Russ, and shrugged.

'This does not confound you?'

'I am a man, raised by wolves and warriors in a world of ice and fire. I am a primarch, made by the Emperor to the patterns of forgotten science. Duality is part of my nature.'

The false Russ nodded as he circled around his other self, his high, black boots crunching in the snow. 'The civilised barbarian. The magic hater who surrounds himself with mumbling priests. The berserk thinker. The leashed hound who runs free. The Terran Fenrisian.'

'Aye,' said Russ. 'That's me. It does a man no favours to be straightforward. Now I believe you owe me a boon.'

The false Russ' face hardened. 'You should not have won.'

'You let me win,' said Russ.

'Maybe,' said the false Russ, and his shrug and mien were the exact replicas of Russ' own.

'You still owe me a boon,' said Russ.

'Very well. One question. One answer. This is it, ask wisely.'

Before the ritual, Russ had formulated his question carefully. He could not ask how to beat Horus, because he knew that was impossible. Similar questions would lead to similar results.

'You're wondering how you can beat Horus. You can't,' said the false Russ; reading his thoughts, or perhaps their thoughts were the same conceived

simultaneously.

'That is not my question,' said Russ.

'Then speak the one that is.' The false Russ looked upwards at the sky. 'Time passes strangely here. You cannot afford to delay.'

Russ lifted his arm and pointed to the weapon impaling the earth. 'The spear. How can it aid me in beating my brother, Horus the fallen one, arch traitor and destroyer of my father's dream?'

'Are you sure it can?; said the false Russ with a mocking smile.

'It is a wyrd weapon, bound to me and I to it though I wish it were not so. I grasp it and dream darkly. I leave it behind me and it finds me wherever I am. Gifts from the Emperor have two edges that cut both ways. There must be a purpose to it or it would not be here. He would not have given it to me if there were no reason for it It is the key to all of this.'

'That weapon could be a projection, a false hope, a lie in this den of lies. You could have thrown away your chance to win. You could have asked the wrong question.'

'I do not think I have,' said Russ. 'And if I have, then that is my wyrd. Tell me of the spear.'

'So be it.'

The false Russ held up his arm. The spear shot out of the snow and into his outstretched hand with the slap of metal on flesh. Although it lacked the snarling wolf mount and the knotwork on the blade, and was altogether more sober in decoration than Russ' version of the spear, he was in no doubt that it was the same weapon in different guise Its golden blade shone with the same light. Its body emitted the same sensation of unease.

The false Russ brandished the spear above his head and shouted:

'I am the spear that sways, *Gungnir* am I!' His voice boomed. The spear blazed with light at the calling of its name. He stared triumphantly into Russ' eyes. 'An old name borrowed from an old god whose world was not so different to yours. This is the spear that cannot miss, that drives forever at the truth of things. It is the Wolfsbane. This spear was made by the Allfather. A portion of His might was beaten into its blade.'

'It has His strength?'

'It has more than that,' said the false Russ. '*Gungnir's* great gift is wisdom. Your Emperor sees much. This spear contains a portion of His sight. Because of that it can show the truth to all men, no matter how great or meek, and no matter how painful the revelation. It is merciless in that regard. It speaks mostly of death. That is why you fear it.'

'I fear nothing.'

'That is a lie.'

The false Russ brought the spear around and held it with the point uppermost. He slammed the counterweight into the ice, cracking it. Thunder rolled over the horizon.

'How can it do so?' said Russ. His misgivings about the weapon grew.

'It is so because your father made it so, just as He made you the way you are. You have a role to play. The question is, will you perform it? At Alaxxes you swore not to be the unthinking weapon of the Emperor. At Terra you convinced yourself you could continue to serve under your own terms. But you can turn aside now completely, and forge your own path. Be a warlord the galaxy can respect. Not all generals need be tyrants. You can offer shelter to the innocent, for a while. Leave the war behind.'

There was a moment's hesitation, only a moment. Then Russ shook his head.

'I will perform my duty, as is my oath and my bond.'

'The loyal hound as always.'

'I do this freely, of my own accord.'

'Then know thyself, Leman Russ,' said the false Russ, 'and take possession fully of these gifts your father gave you.'

As fast as a striking *lindorm*, the false Russ drove the spear into Leman Russ' primary heart. Flesh baked in disruptor fires. Bones shattered. The organ was obliterated. *Gungnir* was not done, but continued on, bursting from Russ' back, transfixing him on the shaft. The leaf-headed blade was black with gore in the moonlight, steaming cooked blood.

'Wisdom hurts, doesn't it?' said the false Russ. His savage glee mimicked Russ' battle joy. 'Your brother was a wolf, so this spear is his bane, but you are also a wolf, and it will cut you too, in the same way. As you said, His gifts cut two ways.'

The false Russ yanked the spear free. Russ sank to his knees. Somehow, he lived, though one heart was dead, and the other beat unsurely. A gaping wound had been punched through his body. Blood poured from his chest in red cataracts.

That was not the worst of the primarch's injuries. The most terrible wound had been cut into his soul and the burning salt of knowledge rubbed into it.

He knew. He knew what he was. He knew what all the primarchs were.

His face was numb. Cold crushed his limbs. With wide eyes he looked up into the face of his killer; so familiar, yet so different.

'What are we?' he said, though he knew full well, and his soul shrivelled in the fires of revelation. 'How could our father have brought us into this world? How could He have made us?'

'As your brother Magnus found, knowledge always has a price,' said the false Russ with a sneer. '*You* wished to know, and now you do. The price for the spear's awakening is your own. This knowledge will forever torment you, and eventually

it will chase you from your home. But know this, Leman of the Russ, you need only wound your brother with this spear to remind the Warmaster that he is Horus Lupercal, son of the Emperor, and not the puppet of Chaos. The rest will follow.'

Thus enlightened, Leman Russ fell dead in the snow.

Leman Russ howls for an audience in the hall of the Erlking.

FOURTEEN

The Testing Of Bjorn

Mountain silence fills the soul. It is a potent form of quiet. Through the absence of sound the animus of a place can be felt. In the mountains, the soul of the living can touch the soul of the earth, the sky, the rock.

Bjorn liked the silence and sought it out when not at war. No ale song or boasting sullied the mountainsides. They sang their own songs, of wind through trees and water on stone, of creaking ice and shifting rock. Trees groaned. Animals called. No man's voice could be heard in the mountains of Asaheim, and Bjorn liked it that way.

He did not like the silence of the Krakgard on that stifling summer's day. The chants of the gothi were done. The weight of the mountain at his back pressed on him, as if a warrior offered silent challenge, and waited for him to turn around to knock his head in with his axe.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood to attention. Wind blew around the collar of his leather suit, stirring them. He waited tensely in anticipation of the blow. There was nothing behind him. It was a fanciful thought. Too close to fear. Nevertheless, Bjorn felt him, the man who would end his life. He had the impression if he strained his ears only a little more, he would hear his heartbeat, his hungering breath. It was as if Morkai himself stared at his back.

The sensation fled at the first notice of Leman Russ' approach.

Footsteps rasped heavily in scree. Stones skittered down the slope behind the primarch's progress. He smelled broken stone and post-human sweat. He came from the left-hand side. Why did he not use the stairs?

'I have returned, Bjorn of Tra,' said Leman Russ.

'You are alone, my lord.'

'I am. Look upon me.'

'I cannot' said Bjorn.

'The gothi forbade it. I recall. Where are they?' asked Russ.

'The gothi are dead,' said Bjorn.

'How?' asked Russ.

'I heard,' said Bjorn.

'Then tell me what you heard.'

Leman Russ paused at the edge of the circle around Bjorn's sentry place. His presence was almost as awful as the non-thing that had been staring at his neck this last hour.

Bjorn stared straight ahead. This was important. He must formulate the words right.

'Eight times I heard the cries of the dead and the battle chants of lost tribes. Eight times I heard an attack. Eight times I heard the ring of steel on steel. And then it stopped. When the gothi's chant began again, Halvar Flintdrake's voice was silent.'

Russ crunched over the gravel to stand near him. Still he remained outside the circle of wolf skulls. Still Bjorn did not turn to look at him.

'And then what did you hear?' WOLFSBANE

'j heard the screams of fiends,' Bjorn said. 'Eight times, fell voices shrieking min. Eight times I heard them wail. Eight times I heard them fall silent. And when the gothi again sang the wyrd-make, Ake Akesson the Snowmaker did not speak.'

'What came after?' asked Russ.

Thereafter there were eight earthquakes, which shook the rock upon which I sit. Still I did not look back. The earth ground and rumbled. Eight times the gothi spoke their words of power. When the shaking was done, Wise Gimfulfor did not raise his voice.

Then came eight blasts of wind, so strong they lifted me from this rock, and I bloodied my fingers clinging to the boulder's skin. When they were done, Edun Balthunsbane was silent.

'To eight strikes of lightning, Gerrun Hros was lost. Eadrede to eight storms of laughter.'

'What of Kva?'

'Seven times I heard a great wolf howl. Each time it did, I heard the sounds of fighting, and tasted witchery on the breeze. Each time it stopped, I thought the world would end, and Morkai had ascended the slopes of the dead to run amok in the land of the living. Each time, when I thought it done, it began again. Maleficarum worked upon me, urging me to turn around. Voices whispered to me, pleading, that if I were to go to their aid I would save the two who remained.'

'You ignored them.'

'As I was ordered,' said Bjorn. 'So I remained. At the eighth howling, Kva cried out. The wolf was gone. Thandar Greymane was silent, but the chant began again.'

'Kva chanted still?'

'The Divided One was there until the end,' said Bjorn. 'Seven ice tempests he fought away, chanting all the while. The eighth ended him. After he was silent,

something lingered, standing where you are now.'

'You have done well. I lift the ban of the priests. My task is done. You may turn around.'

So closely did the voice resemble Russ' that Bjorn almost obeyed. He was already turning when he stopped himself. Bjorn's hearts froze with foreboding. Why had the primarch not used the stair? Why did he not enter the circle?

'I was told not to look back into the glen,' he said warily. 'Under any circumstances. I gave an oath. You cannot make me break it, my jar!.'

'You would deny your primarch?' said Russ. The voice wavered, taking on an inhuman timbre.

'I would deny him this. You are not he.'

Russ moved around the outside of the wolf skull circle, only it was not Russ. Bjorn was sure of that. His scent was wrong. Everything was wrong.

'How dare you defy me, cripple,' said the voice. It cast aside all pretence, becoming a chorus of wet growls that mimicked speech.

'I am your primarch, your lord, your father.'

The heavy stink of fur crusted with old blood washed over Bjorn. A wolf smell, but sick. The being came within the circle then, and as it stepped over the low wall the wolf skulls exploded, peppering Bjorn with sharp fragments. It approached Bjorn from behind. A hand landed on his shoulder. It was barely human. Fur sprouted from its thick, short fingers. The thumb was too far back, diminished, halfway to a dewclaw.

'Turn and face your master.'

'You are not my master. You are not my father. You are maleficarum, and I will not turn to look upon you.'

The thing laughed, each exhalation dropping an octave until the stone Bjorn sat upon vibrated with subsonic resonance. Bjorn glanced down at the stub of his left arm. If he were in his battleplate, he might stand a chance. He could gut this thing with his lightning claw. He had seen the Neverborn killed. But he was not. He was in his ritual leather armour. All he had was his plain iron sword. His hand closed around the hilt and he prepared to sell himself dearly.

'Then you will die,' it said. The blunt claws scraped over Bjorn's shoulder, furrowing the leather. A rope of drool slid from the air over his head, and landed upon his cheek. Hot breath caressed his skin.

Bjorn tensed.

'One-Handed!' a voice bellowed from the steps below the vigil place. 'Down!'

Bjorn threw himself forwards as the beast struck at him. Something sharp opened the skin of his back. A blade thrummed into the circle. It hit the thing behind him with the meaty kiss of steel parting flesh. A disruptor field boomed. Bjorn choked on smoke of such foulness he thought he would die.

A daemonic howl of outrage echoed from the Volda Hammarki.

A second later he was being hauled to his feet.

Leman Russ had returned. He was singed, his hair burnt back and eyebrows curled. His face was red from fire and lips chapped from cold. He was bloodied, his clothes tom. A weapon slit parted the fabric and leather covering his chest over his primary heart and his gear was drenched in blood. But it was him.

Without thinking, Bjorn made to look at his assailant. Russ grabbed his shoulder. 'Don't look behind you, remember?' he said. He reached past Bjorn and pulled out the Emperor's Spear.

'What was it?' said Bjorn.

'Best not to see,' said Russ, looking past him. 'It is a non-thing, a corrupt wight. One of those beings referred to as the Neverborn. A daemon.' He was thoughtful. 'A word we must learn to take seriously.'

'You used the Emperor's Spear.'

'I did!' said Russ. He smiled as he hefted it. A crust of black blood had formed on the blade, baked hard by the weapon's power field. 'For all its bad wyrd, it is a well-balanced weapon. That was a good throw.'

'It was.' Bjorn took in Russ' wounds.

'You are injured.'

'In the Underverse. Kva said there was a price.' Russ waved his concerns away. 'I paid it, and now I know how to hurt Horus.'

Russ did not say beat. Bjorn noted that well. There was something about the primarch that was different. Bjorn's eyes flicked over his face. He was behaving as he always did, brash, carefree, bold, but under his eyes were new, purplish smears, and he looked…. *How did he look?* thought Bjorn.

Haunted, that was the only word that fit how he looked.

'I found myself upon the steps. Where are the gothi?' asked Russ.

'They will not be joining us,' said Bjorn. 'They sleep on the red snow.'

'The manner of their death?'

'Heroic,' said Bjorn simply.

'We will go to them, and see what can be done to honour them in death,' said Russ.

'I cannot,' said Bjorn. 'It is forbidden.'

'Yes you can,' said Russ. 'Just keep your eyes closed.'

Russ led the way back down into the glen. Russ bound Bjorn's eyes over with a strip tom from his own shirt, and the primarch led him by the arm down the steps.

Russ could see Bjorn's assessment was correct as soon as the circle came in sight. The gothi were all dead. The stony ground was tom up as if ploughed, and drenched in blood. Strange weapons were strewn around, though there were no corpses except those of the dead Rune Priests. Some of them were battered

beyond recognition, their ritual suits ripped open and flesh stamped into the churned earth. Something towards the end had flash-frozen the corpses.

Kva's body was more intact than most. He lay with his eyes and mouth open, his body encased in a sleeve of melting ice shot through with ribbons of blood. The ice was already beginning to run in the savage summer's heat. Nearby lay Kva's twin guardians Sharing flesh as they had before their birth, they were mashed into a single mass.

The grand menhir was blackened and tilted to one side. Paler stone showed where it had been forced partially from the ground. A crack ran across the middle, close to breaking it in two.

Bjorn sniffed at the air.

'Stinks, doesn't it?' said Russ. 'Magic and desperation. Like Prospero.' He shook his head. 'We use the weapons of the enemy at our peril, but I don't see any other choice.'

'Kva warned you,' said Bjorn, 'and now he is dead.'

'He did. So did Malcador, and Constantin Valdor. They were all right. I have what I need but at such cost…' He stopped himself saying something he would regret. 'This place,' he said suddenly. 'It must be destroyed. It is tainted. Fell things move here. The barrier between warp and world has thinned.'

'You shall burn it?' said Bjorn.

'No, my son,' said Russ. 'That will not be nearly enough. The Krakgard must be remade and the Hel-road through Syrtyr's Door closed. That way will not be safe to use again.' He growled. 'Another task for a later day. We have much to do before.'

Russ touched the ice covering Kva's face. It was slippery with running water.

'Until next winter,' he said.

FIFTEEN

The Battle Of Trisolian A-4

Broad beams of lightning gunfire cracked the air with sudden, heat-driven displacement, shaking the storage cavern with unnatural thunder. A cohort of thallaxii stalked past guns flashing their coruscating arcs of death. Trisolian A-4's subterranean agrifields could not fall.

If the world died their main food supply would be lost and they would be starved out The fighting began there against groups of Traitor Legion infiltrators seeking to end the campaign before it began.

They had been spotted. Battle commenced. Naturally the magos domina directed the fight from her fortress realm within the Septa station of the Heptaligon. Only her lucky underlings got to experience the thrill of combat.

That is how she had put it to Cawl Had his sense of self-preservation not intervened, he would have begged to differ.

The legionaries opposing them wore blue Night Lords or Alpha Legion, Cawl could not tell through the smoke The signal pulse of their ident beacons was corrupted. Imperial codes had been replaced by the identifiers of the enemy. The smoke shrouded everything further than five metres away. Ruptured oxygen pipes quickened fires enough to make them burn steel. The stink of hot metal was overpowering. Cawl's sensors bleeped out a cacophonous din of alarms that stressed the spaces of his mind. Gas. Fire. Bullets. Explosions. So many ways to die, and the coterie of minor machine-spirits bonded to his mind were only too eager to tell him all about them.

His thallaxii advanced, methodically spraying the hall end with their weapons. Energy discharge of myriad sorts provided a colourful display. Phased plasma bursts and over-charged photons competed to see which could blaze brightest. Las-fire sped in short, straight lines; artificial lightning zigged and zagged.

A hexagonal crate of soil exploded. He saw a legionary go down, the gaping hole in its chest-plate lined with the glow of molten ceramite. Another fell, drilled through in three different places by the indigo beams of a multi-laser. Mass-reactives blew all over the frontal casing of one of the thallaxii. It staggered, sinking lower upon its knees. Gas sprayed from a severed tube. Cawl thought it would fall, but it paused as it rerouted function away from damaged components, then it lumbered on, the slight limp it now suffered hindering it not at all.

The legionaries fell back like ghosts. The thallaxii plodded on, weapons swinging on their gimbals as they tracked, locked onto and assessed everything that might pose a threat.

A moment's relative quiet fell. Alarms wailed all over the facility. Decompression winds surged violently and died as breaches in the agri-caverns were made and bulkheads sealed against them. Cawl risked poking his head around the fallen utility column he cowered behind. He gripped his volkite serpenta so tightly his fingers ached. He had not fired a single shot.

An oxygen pipe overhead roared like a flamethrower. Cawl risked accessing the infosphere to hunt out its command protocols and shut it off. He found it. Like an extinguished candle the pipe went out. The wall opposite was blackened for metres around. At least now he felt he had done something useful.

The thallaxii paused ten metres away. Cawl had a minor pict view in his third eye run a text screed eavesdrop on their conversation. Their communications were terse, to the point and exclusively concerned with killing.

Their next course of action agreed, they advanced again. Cawl swallowed. He was assigned as support to them. He would have to follow. He did not want to. He was unaccustomed to the armour he wore. The weight of the servo-harness mounted on his back was supported by suspensors, but the mass upset his gait, and he was forced to move oddly, ridiculously, to keep up with the shock troops.

Chiming more insistent than his threat indicators announced an incoming communication. Hester Aspertia Sigma-Sigma's mirrored visage imposed itself over his field of vision.

'Cawl,' she said. *'Nothing like battle, is there?'* She was gloating. No doubt she could read his discomfort through her battle omnispex. He was subordinate to her, and no one that served Sigma-Sigma was beyond her oversight. He imagined his craven heartbeat racing across her own displays, and he attempted to quell his fear.

'The enemy have fallen back,' he said.

'The Ordo Reductor Taghma serving here is a fine one,' she said. *'But the war goes ill elsewhere. The Heptaligon stands, but the extraction station at Trisolian A-3 has already fallen. The enemy will be sending reinforcements from there.'*

'What should I do?' he said.

'Attend to the fallen. Fight,' she said. 'I *have much to deal with.'* Her face vanished from his third eye.

The squeal of treads on metal grabbed his attention. Smoke curled around a fast-moving tank festooned with weaponry.

'Legionary Sicaran Destroyer tank, sector two!' Cawl vox blurted. He ducked as it opened fire.

The thallaxii were incapable of fear, and therefore evidenced a more heroic reaction than Cawl, They immediately returned fire Unlike the legionaries' battleplate, the tank's hide was proof against their weaponry. Earthing sparks fizzed from its hull. Plasma carved molten slashes into its glacis, but it accelerated towards the cyborgs, spewing laser beams.

A thallax at the far end of the line spouted magnesium-white fire from its blank faceplate. It fell to its knees and clanged to the floor face down, its organics reduced to greasy smoke. A second lost an arm to a las-beam. The limb spun through the air, and clattered off the wall behind where Cawl hid. He cringed at the noise.

'Armoured assault, sector two!' he shouted. He sent out a data burst and activated his locator beacon at full strength, not caring who might lock on to it.

The thallaxii parted to allow the tank through. It caught one a glancing blow on the leg as it passed, knocking the cyborg down. Stabbing fires flickered into the tank's weaker rear armour. It locked its tracks, skidding to a halt right by Cawl's hiding place. It bore the dark blue heraldry of the Night Lords, and was covered in chains dangling bones and bloody scraps that had recently adorned living bodies. The tracks spun in opposite directions, pivoting the tank on the spot to face the dwindling number of cyborg troops.

Cawl hunkered down, praying to the Omnissiah that he would not be detected. He came close to giving away his position with a joyous emission of data when a short, pointed message wrote itself across his internal displays.

<Help is at hand.>

A red marker blinked into being on his cartograph. Reinforcements moved slowly towards a companionway gallery overlooking the cavern. Chanting the doleful, single digit of death, 'Zero, zero, zero, zero,' a coven of myrmidon destructors moved in to attack.

They were massive things, belligerent grotesques humming with power, fanatic technicae who had given their bodies entirely over to augmentation. The thallaxii they came to support had the uniformity of manufactorum produced units, and appeared inhuman. Not so the myrmidons.

The myrmidons were architects of their own enhancement, and so they were blessed with the potency the Machine-God provides to he who works his own will upon his own form. Little more of flesh remained to them than it did to the thallaxii, but they appeared more human for their ugliness. On one a polished skull, most likely the warrior's original, jutted out on a steel cable neck from beneath hunched shoulders. His arms bore matched plasma cannons. Eyes of red glass swept the battlefield with the thin lines of ranging lasers. From the front of another dangled a pair of flesh-and-blood arms, incongruously wired into a metal breastplate. All of them wore robes, though they did not need them. They were

the priests of the Machine-God as destroyer, horrific and potent with the Motive Force in reward for their devotion.

Their stride was as measured, slowed to a reverential pace by the burden of their inbuilt reactors and enormous weapons. Their heads swayed with their ponderous motion. The Sicaran noticed them, and its turret rotated to bring its twin weapons to bear.

Double pulses of lascannon fire tore up towards the companionway, catching it from beneath. Gobbets of metal sprayed upwards. One of the myrmidons was caught full in the chest, rocked back by the explosive reaction of cohesive light contacting matter.

The others repaid the favour.

Cawl's ears vibrated painfully to the building thrum of a conversion beamer powering to fire. A cumbersome, complex weapon to operate, in the hands of the myrmidon lord who bore it, it reached its full, deadly potential. Only one such as he had the internal space to mount dampers required to stabilise the weapon correctly, the cranial implants to calculate the precise focal point for the beam reaction, the internal reactor to feed its massive hunger for power. Light gathered in the weapon's exhaust vents.

'Omnissiah exultant!' the myrmidon blared through multiple vox-emitters. A blinding shaft of energy burst from the weapon's blunt end, and slammed into the Sicaran's turret. This did not cause the damage.

At a conversion beamer's focal point, matter underwent an instantaneous conversion to energy. It was this that ripped away the turret with the force of a minor fusion reactor going critical.

The detonation was deafening. Cawl managed to pull himself back behind his cover just in time to avoid being blinded by the accompanying after-flash and immolated by the fire of freed atoms.

Pressure ripped at his robes. The explosion's electromagnetic pulse sent his implants haywire. For a moment, he lay stunned, machine senses offline, human senses numbed.

He pulled himself up with the help of his servo-arms.

The Sicaran was a blackened husk. The top half had been completely obliterated. The bottom half was cupped like a palm holding a guttering fire.

'So perish all who turn the gifts of the Machine-God against the Omnissiah,' intoned the myrmidon.

Cawl glanced up at them. He ran down the corridor, pleasantly surprised at the extra strength his power armour gave him. But he was too slow to catch his charges. The legionaries had been sheltering at a junction. The flash and rattle of weapons receded down the corridor to the left, leading to one of the vast cavern-fields. The cyborgs' in sight was immune to the overload that had floored Cawl,

and they had already moved on. He looked around helplessly. Dead Night Lords and Word Bearers were scattered about the decking. Their colours were different to one another, but the grisly nature of the trophies they wore made them brothers of a sort, and set them apart from legionaries as Cawl knew them.

There was something else there, a ragged corpse in black with the stature of a standard human.

Sensing something amiss, Cawl approached it gingerly, priming his serpenta. He pointed the weapon at the figure, though he had no reason to believe it alive.

The figure had been felled by an access panel whose workings he seemed to have been in the process of subverting with a portable cogitation unit. He was face down, hidden by his robes, one pale hand stretched out to the side of him.

Cawl's Mechanicum power armour allowed him to roll the augmented figure over with his foot.

The corpse was a tech-adept. The augmetics told Cawl that But his robes were black, a colour no forge world wore, and the sacred symbology of the Cult Mechanicus was perverted. Around the machina opus stitched over his heart were eight arrows, like those of a compass rose, and the skull contained within the cogs wore a daemonic grimace.

Cawl looked more closely. There were strange malformations in the adept's flesh that augmentation could not explain. His jaw line was fringed with bony excrescence that had grown over some of the metal of his implanted voxmitter. Upon his head. Upon his head… Something moved upon his head, wet and sinuous.

Gripped with foreboding, Cawl leaned in to see what nestled between the cabling across the adept's scalp.

As Cawl bent down, the adept's eyes snapped open. They were like no eyes Cawl had ever seen. Vertical slit pupils split irises striated with purple and gold.

Instinctively, Cawl fired his volkite into the man's face. Metal and flesh vanished beneath the torrent of energy, exploding into steam. He shut off his gun when the body ignited. Dying augmetics sent the headless man's limbs into a maniac dance.

Entranced, horrified, Cawl watched the corrupt adept burn.

He had killed his first man. Suddenly, the weapon felt more natural in his hand.

Cawl remained staring at the corpse for some time, until the plaintive psalm of a distress cant intruded itself onto his consciousness. The fallen myrmidon was still alive. He had work to do.

He went back up the corridor to the myrmidon's aid. His companions had brought him down from the companionway. When Cawl appeared, their mechadendrites and other subsidiary limbs laid the injured cyborg down and they stepped back.

Cawl knelt to attend the injured man, if man he could claim to be. He set about his work eagerly. He was well versed in the secrets of mechanics and biologies, and healed the warrior's wounds efficiently.

Soon he was immersed in the hallowed mysteries of nerve shunts and biologic emulator organ repair. When he was done, the myrmidons departed with a meaningful nod, and chittered binaric speed prayers. More thanks pulsed from their augmented minds into his, along with a token of gratitude, a promise of future help.

The myrmidons were holy avatars of the Machine-God's wrath. Cawl had earned their respect. The moment should have been precious, but Cawl could not put the dead adept's disfigurements from his mind.

SIXTEEN

A Calculated Betrayal

Battle continued in Trisolian A-4's cavern farms for the remainder of the day. Cawl went where he was needed, using his arts to mend the fallen, until fate found him within one of the giant agrifields.

Lines of blue-green foliage marched away to vanishing point under yellow lumens suspended from cold, weeping rock. Long troughs of hydroponic liquid fed bare roots. He supposed it must normally be a quiet place. No more.

Half the cavern was ablaze. The troughs had been broken somewhere down the line, and a lake of thin yellow water had filled the perfectly flat space. Missile fire and the roar of bolters boomed, amplified by the stone. Agri-machines, oblivious to the chaos, raced towards the damaged troughs to repair, only to be shot down.

Between the rows of food plants, thallaxii marched, their line staggered to increase the spread of their gunfire. Energy weapons made musical sounds with their discharge. Legionary weapons fired back, smashing the cyborgs from their feet. Undaunted, the survivors pressed on. The traitors had set up a wide front in the field. Rather than destroying the crops and moving on, they seemed to be attempting to take the facility. That made them vulnerable.

Cawl's own fear had diminished now. Taking a life had made him careless of his own, and he walked in a half-crouch behind a thallax trooper, using its heavily armoured war body to shield his far more delicate own.

The rapid, doomy rattle of a heavy bolter sounded not far ahead. Speeding shells scythed down the plants. Cawl ducked behind the thallax, but it shook and stopped suddenly. Bio-suspension fluids gushed from holes in its front and fire licked from around its joints. Enraged by the death of the machine, Cawl leaned out around its corpse and snapped off a shot from his volkite. Dark, armoured shapes were advancing through the smoke, weapons thumping. The thallax took another hit. Cawl took a breath, and leaned out again, yelling in exultation as he punched one of the armoured giants from its feet with a precise shot through the helmet.

But they were not firing back. It had become silent. Dangerously silent.

He looked to the side. The thallax had frozen. Red lumens blinked on the back of the casings of them all. Suddenly, they put up their weapons, and went into a stance of attention, before shutting down. All the Mechanicum troops were

inactive. Tech thralls froze. Skitarii spasmed as they fought with orders imposed from outside. Only the adepts and others with independent will remained active, and they looked about in bewilderment. Those that continued to fight were shot down. Weapons clacked onto the floor as the rest took stock of their situation, and surrendered.

Cawl reached into his augmetic, scanning the command frequencies. An all-band message swamped the infosphere, disabling the cyborgs and urging the rest to submit.

<*Surrender. Surrender. Surrender,*> the order went, transmitted with the correct codes.

'Aspertia,' Cawl whispered.

The lumens went out. Emergency lighting flicked on, flooding the agri-cavern hall with bloody red light. Cawl glanced upwards. From the row next to his, a boltgun was pressed against his head. Somehow, the legionary had reached his side without Cawl noticing.

'Yield or die,' said the legionary.

Cawl went to his knees and held up his hands.

'Yield.'

His gun was taken. Cawl expected death, but the legionary ordered him to stand.

'You're coming with us,' he said.

Cawl was delivered along with dozens of other adepts of the Trisolian Taghmata to the Heptaligon's Septa station. Legionaries had seized control of the capital, and guarded every intersection. Blood smears on the walls indicated recent executions. His escort of Night Lords marched him past all this too fast for him to get more than a glimpse of ongoing atrocities.

The priests were kept under guard in an antechamber of Central Command, and taken one by one within. They all came out again, but some were taken away with grim looks on the human portions of their faces. The rest were herded to the far side of the room. Speech was forbidden; the Heptaligon's infosphere was shut down.

After a wait of an hour, it was Cawl's turn. A legionary grabbed him without warning and shoved him through the double doors. The lights were off. The command chairs were empty and their systems powered down. The shutters were open and the planet shine of Etrian flooded the space.

The legionary departed, leaving Cawl in the dark with Hester Aspertia Sigma-Sigma.

'You have betrayed the Imperium,' said Cawl, when they were alone.

'It is a calculated betrayal,' she replied. 'Do you think I wanted to do it? I had no choice.'

'But we were winning!' he said, taking an angry step forwards.

'We would have lost. I can show you the calculations if you like The Warmaster would have diverted more resources to this system until it was overwhelmed, and we would all have died. Is that what you want, Cawl, to die?'

Cawl remained defiantly silent.

Aspertia clattered forwards. 'The creed of our people is the preservation of the past. The past's knowledge means nothing if it cannot be conveyed into the future.' She ran her hands over the canisters attached to her front. 'For that reason, I carry these. You know what they are?' she challenged him. The nature of the canisters was supposed to be secret, but it was widely rumoured throughout the system what they were.

'Clones,' he said. 'I have heard they are clones of yourself, kept in embryonic.'

She snickered. 'Yes. Yes. The whisper-mongers have that right. What else have you heard about my little babies?' She swayed from side to side. The canisters clicked together.

'That they are your bid for immortality.'

She rounded on him, her manner fierce. 'Wrong, wrong, wrong!' she said. Her words were overlaid by angry blurts of audible data cant. 'The preservation of my life is nothing.' She retreated a little from Cawl. 'But my part in the Great Work is irreplaceable. Within these canisters are no homunculi, but gene-perfect replicas of my brain. The rest is vestigial. Irrelevant. Why should I wish to replicate what I have already discarded?' She rapped a metal claw against her elongated skull. 'But the brain, that is the seat of the intellect. The clonelings are fed constantly with an update feed from my main cortex. The preservation of all I have learned is their purpose. Should I die, they will be force matured and implanted into a new body.

'For three hundred years, Cawl, I have fought as a domina of the Taghmata. I have served in seven different Exploratory Fleets of the Great Crusade. I have been to the edge of the galaxy and back. During my travels I have faced fourteen hostile xenos species, a hundred and three divergent human civilisations. I have waged war alongside nine Legions, and seen the belligerent arts of the Machine-God tested in every imaginable warzone. The wealth of combat data I possess in this one mind would fill a library of paper books.'

She looked down at him.

'Now why would I let that all go to waste?'

'You betray the Emperor to save your knowledge?' said Cawl.

'You still think I do it to save my life!' she scoffed. 'I live and die at the will of the Machine-God! Knowledge is all. To permit any of it to be lost is a great sin.'

'The Emperor…'

'The Emperor? Horus?' she said. 'Who are they, these Terran upstarts? It does not matter who sits upon the throne. What matters is what resides in the tabernacles of Mars. What matters is what is here, preserved in my minds and my memories.' She caressed her silver cheek with a mechadendrite, a curiously sensuous gesture. 'Kelbor-Hal may be right, we may have a more glorious future at the Warmaster's side. He may be wrong. He is definitely one or the other, he cannot be both. But so long as the knowledge is saved, what does it matter? I might live or I might die. Life is a binary state. It is or it is not. The state of being is unstable and liable to collapse at any time into death, which is eternal.'

'We all die,' agreed Cawl. He glanced at the canisters swinging from her chest.

'We do,' she said. 'Only knowledge persists. All that matters is that while I live so does my knowledge so that it might be added to the sum total of all things known. It is in service to the Machine-God that I go to bend my knee at Horus' throne. If the Emperor Himself came here, I would do the same to Him. The question is, what about you? I kept you alive because I see potential in you. Will you follow me, whoever I pledge my service to, or will you protest your loyalty and die? I can use you, Cawl, but that does not mean I will not end you if I must.'

A triple-pincered claw sprang open. A plasma torch flame burst from the centre. It dipped towards Cawl's face. 'It would be a shame to lose that mind of yours,' said Aspertia. 'If l must kill you, I will probably keep it.'

'I serve the Machine-God!' said Cawl. He mastered his anger and spoke as levelly as he could. 'I serve the Machine-God.'

'Excellent,' she said. The torch went out, the claw snapped closed around it. 'Then I will keep you alive for a little while longer. Now join the others. Power is a show, and we have a performance to give.' The door hissed upwards.

Cawl left as quickly as was seemly. As he joined the ranks of Aspertia's acolytes waiting in the antechamber outside, he wondered if the others had suffered the same interrogation; which of them had thrown themselves on her mercy and which needed to be convinced. His mind went back to his unfinished work in his chamber.

If he could complete it, he could be free again.

Slowly, a plan began to form in Belisarius Cawl's mind.

SEVENTEEN

A Father's Request

After so short a time in the Aett, the Legion was readying itself to leave, and Leman Russ called his war council to session.

The Einherjar gathered in the chamber of the Grand Annulus. A monumental feasting hall high in the Valgard, its floor was decorated with an immense round inlay depicting the emblems of the Thirteen Great Companies of the Vlka Fenryka - an adaptation of the kings' stones Fenrisian tribes carried from land to land. Russ had insisted the Annulus be finished before any of the Valgard was completed. It comprised movable segments metres across, each inlaid with a badge of a Wolf Lord. They centred on a circular stone bearing Leman Russ' own tribal symbol. Some had been removed and replaced recently.

The rest of the hall was not yet done. Raw mountain stone had been roughed into blocks and shapes that would take statues and relief panels. Archways, niches and other decorations were but simple, chiselled outlines. One day, Russ wanted the chamber to be the ritual heart of the Vlka Fenryka. For now it remained a cold, unfriendly place. Its entry was sealed with a simple, temporary ceramite blast door. Wheeled scaffolding towers waited in place for workers to return. Tools were neatly racked where artworks would go. Opaque plastek sheeting covered works in progress.

A sombre atmosphere prevailed. There was little talk as the Einherjar waited for their primarch. The chamber swayed slightly with the motion of the world. The room would never be still. Under the vicious tugging of the Wolfs Eye, the Fang was the wavering cap of a child's top, always on the brink of falling.

The door slid aside rapidly, banging into the wall recess that housed it. Leman Russ strode in, Bjorn his shadow. Fewer eyes narrowed at the warrior's presence than in the past, but they still narrowed.

'I am a little late,' said Russ. Across his shoulders he carried the Spear of the Emperor, bearing the sacred if little-liked weapon crosswise, his wrists hooked over the shaft, like the son of a hersir heading to his first skirmish. He was too mighty for a mortal room to fully contain, and though physically the hall was vast enough to accommodate a thousand Vlka, it seemed that the primarch's essence overfilled it, like a fjord spilling torrents into the sea as the tide goes out. Around him buzzed the promise of slaughter. His arrival excited the Einherjar. Images of

blood and battle flitted through their minds, twisting their lips into involuntary snarls.

Russ stalked to the centre of the Annulus, and stood upon the rondel bearing his name badge, the symbol of the Legion, a red wolf's head on a field of grey, his boots either side of the wolf's muzzle.

Silently he acknowledged each of his warriors. He spoke no words to them, but his ice-blue eyes said that he saw them, and that he valued them. The hearts of the Wolves filled with pride at this honour.

'The time for feasting is over,' said Leman Russ. 'I have learned what I came here to learn. I hear the caw of rumour's raven echoing around the halls.' He looked to Grimnr. During the ritual the huscarl and his men heard nothing, and they were alarmed to see Russ' wounds when he returned to them. Russ had told no one what occurred.

'I will tell you,' he continued. 'The eight gothi I took with me to the Krakgard, including Kva, my adviser and friend, are dead. They perished sending me into the Underverse, where even I, a primarch of the Emperor, may not easily go. Within the world of wights and ghosts, I was given the host-challenge by a thing not of this universe. Let it be known that I succeeded. While I quested in that realm our gothi were assailed by the wights of the enemy, and paid for the knowledge I gained with their lives.' He swung the spear from his shoulder and slammed the haft into the floor. The crack of metal on stone echoed from the walls.

'This is what I learned. With this weapon that my father gave me, I shall bring the traitor to his knees, and although I may not kill him, and we may all perish in the attempt, I will bring him pain that shall undo him in the days to come.' Again he looked at all his sons. His gaze was so fierce not one could hold it.

'My warriors. My Einherjar, this might be the last hunt of the Vlka Fenryka. Through many wars I have commanded you, and you have never failed me. Many strange and terrible foes I have ordered you to face, and you have done so without question or hesitation.'

'You are our primarch!' said Ogvai Ogvai Helmschrot. 'We would follow you into Hel if you asked.'

Russ looked sternly at Helmschrot. 'Yes, I am your primarch, I am your lord. I am your gene-father. From my body the gifts my father bestowed upon you were taken. For this, though you each had a mortal sire, I claim the right to call you my sons.'

'We are your sons!' said Baldr Vidunsson. 'I have no other father.' He spat on the floor. His comment elicited growls of agreement from the others.

'I love you as my sons,' said Russ. 'But above my affection for you, beyond what I am, and who I am, I am your king, and I am your king because you chose

me to be so. Forget for a moment that we are Legiones Astartes. Remember instead that we are the lords of Fenris.' He pointed at Hvarl Red-Blade. 'You, Hvarl, are the match of the great heroes of all the sagas.' He turned to Lufven Close-Handed. 'You, Lufven, are a more generous ring-giver than any of the finest kings of history. Ogvai is thoughtful, Baldr is bold. You are a company of warriors that no lord could dream of. You outmatch in spirit and in mettle the best of all my brothers' Legions, and I am proud to be your lord. I should bend my knee to you.' He took a deep breath. 'I have a purpose. For a long time I assumed that purpose on your behalf, sending you into battle with little thought for the blood spilled, and both eyes on the glory that would come.'

'And we were glad to obey!' shouted form BIoodhowl 'Aye!' called the others. They hammered their fists on their chest-plates and howled.

'Yes!' said Russ. A feral light burned in his eyes. 'Yes, you were. But did I have the right to demand you lay down your lives for me?'

'My lord,' said Amlodhi Skarssen Skarssensson, 'as you say, you are our king.'

'A king' said Russ thoughtfully. 'A king. What is a king but a man who rules over other men by their consent? According to our custom, no king of any tribe has the right to command his warriors into a battle they cannot win. No king can force obedience from his subjects if they no longer have his trust. It is our way in the fire and the ice to elect our leaders, and depose them when they fail. I never forget that I was a stranger to this world. I am a foundling lord, imposed on you.'

The Wolves shook their heads.

'We chose you,' a Rune Priest said.

'What other choice was there?' said Russ. 'Fight with me or be killed by me. This is how the Russ came to rule half of Fenris. After Alaxxes, I vowed never to be the blind executioner again. I am no dumb axe swung in another's fist. I will fight Horus.' He slapped his palm against his breast. 'But I will challenge him because I will it, not because my father says so. My brothers wished for me to remain on Terra. I have made my choice. You must make yours. I will not order you to fight him. If you would rather stay here and see what the war brings, then so be it. If you would rather return to Terra to stand with Dorn, Jaghatai and Sanguinius in the Allfather's defence, I will not stop you. Perhaps your lives may be better used there. I am no gothi. I cannot see the future.' He smiled sadly. 'But I will ask you to follow me, into the heart of the traitors' armies. Today, Ogvai Ogvai Helmschrot, I am not commanding you, but asking you to follow me into Hel. You said you would. Would you still?'

Helmschrot bared his fangs. 'There is no other answer to give. I say yes!'

'And I!' called another.

'I will also follow you.'

So they spoke affirmatively. Not one said otherwise. Russ' grim face was suffused with pride. They howled and swore wild oaths, working themselves up into a frenzy.

'Enough!' Russ said.

The howls ceased immediately. The hall fell silent.

'Then to the business of red slaughter. Thanks to Malcador's Knights Errant, we know where Horus is.'

A cartolith snapped on, bathing the dim hall in spectral light.

'The rune marks placed within the *Vengeful Spirit* by Bror Tyrfingr mark out its vulnerable areas for destruction, and will aid our warriors in finding their way through its halls, but they had an additional purpose l commanded Bror keep from the rest of Malcador's agents. Within each inscription was a rune of power, given to him by Kva. These markings allow us to track my brother's ship through the Underverse. At present it is here,' said Leman Russ. He thrust his spear into the hololithic map, holding the spears tip unwavering beneath a bright star, appearing to support it on the point.

Closer inspection revealed it to be a system of common type, not one but three stars: a main sequence primary, with a binary of red dwarf secondaries orbiting far out. It was a system of immense bounds, but only modest importance. It was nowhere, but close to places that mattered, the kind of system where a warlord might bide his time before launching a major attack.

'At this place, called Trisolian,' said Russ, 'we shall bring the Warmaster to heel.'

EIGHTEEN

Lupercal's Bargain

The assembled population of the Heptaligon waited in Tria Station, otherwise called the Orb of Conveyance. Tria was given entirely over to docking facilities, being the main port of the Heptaligon. Metal skies encompassed a volume to rival a small moon. Grav-plating made the interior of the orb an inverted world, where the ground curved overhead in an unbroken sphere. The sight was a breathtaking display of the Machine-God's artistry. There was no up or down in the Orb of Conveyance. A forest of graceful docking spars extended towards the centre, tipped with floating wharfs. Giant lumen panels adorned the interior in binary patterns that spelled out the might of the Machine-God for all to see until distance squeezed them together into a pale yellow glow.

The structure that faced the moon gave into the giant funicular highway that ran down the centre's tether-tube. Opposite the funicular were a profusion of apertures that opened into the void, the stars beyond tinted a subtle blue by the glimmer of atmospheric fields.

Upon Aspertia's grav-dais Cawl attended his mistress. He was thus higher than the common herd, and so had a fine view of the crowds and the sphere. The throng blurred into a mass of red and gunmetal-grey with distance until, between the docked void craft locked to the orb's numerous piers, the people on the upper interior surfaces blended into a rose sea so distant no enhancement of vision could tease it apart into individuals. They were the assembled might of Mars in the Trisolian System. Cawl clicked through his machine senses. The infosphere vibrated with anticipation. The faces of the entire host pointed towards the central point of the Orb of Con veyance, where a single landing platform had been placed, plated in gold and draped with rich red cloth. Hololithic banners scrolled around it in broad bands and were periodically shattered into swirling motes by the passage of hundreds of servo-skulls. Laudatory anthems played over a constant screeching of binaric and grand pronouncements in Gothic. Holoscreens the size of light cruisers displayed the platform for the crowds.

The blood of the betrayed had not yet dried as the Warmaster came to claim his new domain.

Data transfer packets whisked across the space at frequencies of the electromagnetic spectrum invisible to eyes of flesh. To those who could not see

this additional layer of reality, the architecture of the sphere may have seemed brutal, a mess of metal, cables, and poorly considered embellishment. In the higher realms of data transfer a profound beauty was revealed. Cawl looked with near religious awe at the synchronicity of thought on display. It was rare indeed to see such a huge crowd engaged in singular communion.

But though beautiful, the pattern of data transmission was dark in tone. Dread suffused it. None of the adepts within dared transmit their concerns openly, but to the practised eye of Belisarius Cawl, it was visible in the brevity of the communication bursts.

There was no name for the dread that preceded Horus' arrival at the Heotaligon. It was a primeval feeling that predated language. Human concepts were too restrictive to properly describe it. Long before his ship was visible to human sight or machine moderated auspex, fear came like a wall of fog rolling in from a calm ocean. The infosphere throbbed with foreboding. Every patch of skin gleamed with fear sweat.

The dread spiked a moment before Horus' craft flew into the orb. Pieters and augur eyes focused on it, displaying magnified views on the screens. This ship was a Stormbird, common to all the Legions, in the sea-green of the Sons of Horus, ordinary enough - though decorated in the ostentatious manner of Imperial warlords. The double-headed eagle of the Imperium had been removed, replaced by the icon of a glaring eye transfixed by a stylised spear-point.

Cawl expected more ships to follow, but it came in solitary flight. His unease grew as it flew to the centre of the orb and landed upon the platform. Only a potentate utterly sure of his power would come into potentially hostile territory so lightly protected.

'Now we go,' said Aspertia. Grav-engines purred, pushing the dais up towards the landing platform. Cawl lightly gripped the rail and leaned out a little. In Aspertia's wake came the daises of the other traitor adepts. Their reasons for throwing their lot in with Horus were their own. Cawl doubted they would be the same as Aspertia's. She rode proudly amid her acolytes, silver metal face held high.

Cawl looked back to the others, deferentially hanging back from her. He had a very bad feeling about all of this.

The daises gathered around the landing platform in a bobbing crowd. Hololight bathed the occupants' faces. Servo-skulls swooped in to orbit them.

The Stormbird sat ominously upon the platform, venting waste gases from its exhausts. Servitors dumbly went about their tasks around it, ignorant of the terror those who could still call their minds their own felt from the craft. The cockpit windows were dark. The navigation lights were out. Cawl opened his augmetics to its digital emanations, and found the machine-spirits within silent. From where

their simple souls should have run on tracks of light and metal, something else watched. It was unclean, and he hastily severed his connection.

Aspertia guided her dais around the craft. The Stormbird was a blunt thing, as brutal as the warriors it was designed to convey, and bristling with weapons. Her subsidiary limbs waved with confusion. She, like Cawl and every other Mechanicum adept with a modicum of courage, was scanning the craft, and registering only that ominous watchfulness.

A blaring klaxon scattered the daises. Spinning beacon lumens flashed around the back of the ship as, with a hiss of equalising atmosphere, the large rear access ramp descended.

The magi recovered. Aspertia's dais jostled her colleagues out of the way, and drew her level with the stem of the ship. All over the orb interior, the assembled populace of Trisolian waited in fearful silence.

The ramp clanged down to the pad deck. Thick red light lit the ship's interior, defying any form of vision to see more than a metre within.

A lone figure clad in black came down the ramp. It broadcast an announcement of identity, Sota-Nul. Somehow, she looked different in the flesh. She halted at the base of the ramp, her face shrouded, saying nothing.

Aspertia willed her dais closer.

'I am Hester Aspertia Sigma-Sigma,' she said, simultaneously broadcasting her name, biography and rank via data squirt and binaric screech. 'Domina magos of the Trisolian forge world Taghmata.' Still no word was forthcoming from Sota-Nul.

Aspertia shifted.

'I offer the surrender of the forge world to the Warmaster Horus Lupercal in the name of the Fabricator General of Mars, Kelbor-Hal, and for the greater glory of the Machine-God.'

'You deposed your superiors?' said Sota-Nul.

The subtle pressure of an active scan swept over the delegation.

'I did,' said the domina. 'As military commander of this facility, I have assumed control, following the errors of the Viceroy Extractatorian in defying you, and will gladly pass possession of his person to the appropriate Mechanicum authorities to do with as they see fit. I humbly present myself and my forces for assignment in battle.'

Aspertia bowed her head. Her dozens of knees bent, lowering her into a strange form of curtsey.

Sota-Nul obviously approved. A data carrier wave sprang from her internal augmitters, announcing her thoroughly. In flesh speech she said,

'You have chosen wisely. On the Fabricator General's behalf, I accept your fealty.'

'And the Warmaster? He is here, isn't he?' Aspertia's machine voice warbled.

Sota-Nul inclined her head and stood aside, leaving the access ramp free.

'The Warmaster,' she said.

A group of armoured figures appeared suddenly in the ruddy interior, as if they had walked out of thick mist. They were universally savage, their armour hung with awful trophies. First out was a grinning warrior with a high topknot who swept the delegation with a challenging gaze. Three others came with him in a close group, then a Space Marine with halting gait and a serious mien. Their bare faces were pale and angry.

When they were arrayed at the ramp's edge the Warmaster came out.

Horus wore a variant of Terminator armour crafted specifically for his primarch's frame. His hands were sheathed in giant gauntlets from whose backs sprouted claws as long as swords. But impressive though his armour was, it merely acted as a frame for his majesty. His visage was at once beautiful and terrible. He was handsome by standards applicable to gods, his features sculpted by a hand of rare genius. All eyes in Tria Station were fixed upon that face. It was impossible to look away from it. He wore a smile that promised generosity and violence in equal measure.

'Citizens of the Martian Empire,' he said. He did not speak loudly, but his voice carried further than that of the most skilled actor. 'I have come to you to free you from the lies of the False Emperor, my father.'

When he spoke, every thinking being in earshot willed their hearts to be still in case they missed the slightest nuance to his words. When he paused, they craved more.

'You have shown great wisdom in joining yourselves to my cause. At my side, you will help me usher in a new era for the Mechanicum. Together, as equals, not in the master and slave relationship the Emperor forced upon your noble nation, we shall reforge the galaxy and declare a new Terran Empire that shall rival the greatest realms of the ancient days. Only with me can mankind reach its true potential. By embracing the truth of the empyrean shall we conquer the galaxy and rule supremely for evermore.'

A cheer erupted from every mouth and mechanical augment. An outpouring of love for the Warmaster banished every trace of fear, so loud and fervent the ships in the docks shook.

By a great act of will Cawl cut all forms of broadcast and plugged any external data receivers he could find in his augments. He shielded his biological thoughts with a repeated loop of devotional binaric chants that drowned out the speech of the conqueror.

The whole of Trisolian was enthralled. This was the legendary charisma of Horus Lupercal gone bad from within, like a great tree whose limbs bear green

leaves and fresh shoots, but whose heartwood is rotted out. The compulsion to listen went far beyond that engendered by a man of oratorical prowess. The effect the words had was out of all proportion to their meaning. He was an artwork of a master overwritten by a less kind hand, its nobility perverted into something vile An urge to abase himself before this man gripped Cawl, and he knew it was wrong through and through.

'A great age beckons our species,' Horus continued, and though Cawl was now intentionally deaf, he heard it still. 'To share in it I ask only that you pledge your service to me for the duration of this war. The forces of the Emperor are strong. The misguided stand before me. Every gun fired in my service no matter by which branch of humanity is a shot fired in the name of truth.' He lifted a massive claw and pointed at an adept upon Magos Visreen's grav-dais. 'Do you pledge allegiance to me?' the Warmaster said.

'Me?' The adept looked nervously to his fellows. They drew back from him.

'Answer the Warmaster!' shouted the warrior with the topknot. He plucked a mag-locked pistol from his thigh and aimed it at the hapless man.

The adept was too slow in kneeling. The bolt pistol boomed. The adept's body flowered redly, showering chunks of meat and shattered bionics over the side of the grav-dais. They fell into the null grav zone generated at the heart of the sphere, where they took up orbit, like an orrery made from a butcher's leavings. The echoes of the bolt's detonation rang from far-off surfaces.

'What about you?' said the warrior. He aimed his pistol at another adept.

'Ezekyle, put away your gun,' said Horus.

The warrior named Ezekyle made a dismissive noise, and locked his pistol back to his thigh.

The adept he had aimed at knelt. Then the rest followed suit, displaying their submission in a rustle of robes.

'I am with you,' one said. 'I pledge to serve the Warmaster, for the Greater Glory of the Martian Empire,' said another.

'For the Mechanician, I will follow you,' said a third.

So it went on. Wordlessly it was made perfectly clear that all were expected to voice their loyalty. Horus looked to each man and woman present as his lieutenants watched, the threat of death plain in their faces.

The litany of surrender proceeded. The ripples of abasement lapped out into the crowds below, and they proclaimed their loyalty. Cawl kept his head bowed the whole time, until the words stopped, and he looked up to find the would-be master of mankind staring directly at him.

An ancient Terran saying had it that the eyes were windows to the soul. In that moment, Cawl could believe it to be true. What he saw behind Horus' face was burned into his memory forever.

He could never serve what he saw behind those eyes.

'I am with you, my lord,' he said. 'I pledge my service to you and my life.' The oath was hollow. As he spoke, his interference cant shielding his mind, the thought of escape rose urgently in his thoughts.

When the giving of oaths was done, Horus looked over the leaders of the forge world, and into the crowds packing the skin of the sphere.

'Death is the price of disloyalty to me,' he said, and the screens showed his vastly magnified face. 'But know this - if I bring suffering to some it is because I would save you.'

He returned to his ship. His men followed. Sota-Nul was the last aboard. She turned at the top of the ramp, and looked down upon Aspertia's barge. The Stormbird's engines ignited, their jet burn focusing to searing daggers of fire. 'You are the Warmasters now,' she shouted over the rising whine of the ship. 'Do not forget your oaths. Shortly I shall send advisers to you. With the blessing of Kelbor-Hal, await your orders.' The ramp rose. Before it had closed fully, the Stormbird lifted off, turned and accelerated away.

NINETEEN

Arrival At Trisolian

Curling tendrils of energy chased the *Hrafnkel* from the empyrean. Geller shields flickered maddeningly with an excess of energies. Other ships followed in close formation, bouncing on complex gravitic waves. Before they were fully out of the bleed of the warp, the ships ignited their real space engines, adjusted their flight paths and raced for the binary pair.

With reckless speed, the Space Wolves came to Trisolian.

Three suns created a complex gravity map. The Vlka Fenryka entered at the lesser Mandeville on the edge of the binaries' shared-termination shock, well away from the primary star and the traitor fleet moored around its worlds. Far enough away for their warp signatures to remain hidden.

Russ sprawled in his throne upon the command deck. Mortals and legionaries filled the machine pits and crew galleries. Trisolian 2a and 2b dominated the oculus. Russ' fleet were dark shapes coasting on void tinted a dreary red. Reports came in from the jarls of the Legion and the warriors assigned to ship command, announcing safe warp passage. Though their emergence into real space had been smoother than their arrival at Fenris, Russ kept an ear on the chatter around the vox-stations, half expecting high losses from their turbulent journey.

The last report came in.

'The fleet has arrived without loss, my lord,' announced a fleet kaerl.

'A good omen,' said Leman Russ, and he sat forwards. 'Have we been detected?'

'Our vessels are hidden in the electromagnetic envelope of the two lesser stars, my king,' said the kaerl. 'We are as yet unseen.'

'Horus has two eyes,' said Russ. 'One spies into the warp. Rune Priests, have my brother's sorcerers seen us?'

The psykers of his Legion clustered together, heads nearly touching, as they debated the meaning of the runes they cast upon the floor. One looked up. Maet Far-scryer he was called, a priest of Tra-Tra. Russ didn't know him well, but he was more familiar than some who had been promoted to take the place of the gothi sacrificed for his trip to the Underverse.

'They are blinded, Lord of Winter. They do not see us in the Verse, the Oververse or in the Underverse.'

Russ grinned. His sharp teeth showed pink in the turbulent glow of the stars.

'I trust you, my kaerls and my warriors, to keep it that way,' said Russ. 'Take us between the binary towards the primary sun. Full speed. I want as much energy committed to the engines as they will take. Where fleets of lesser men match the speed of the slowest today we strive to sail at the speed of the fastest, my sons. Aegis to maximum. Charge weapons batteries - as soon as we are past this binary, Horus will see us and he will come for us. We must strike swiftly to decapitate the serpent.'

Adepts of the new Adeptus Mechanicus began their hymns to the machines. Russ observed them ruefully. Dorn called him a hypocrite; if that were so, so was their father, who had decried all religions as false save when it suited Him. Everything came down to expediency in the end. Russ took after Him in that way.

The *Hrafnkel* juddered. The multiple machine voices of its systems raised in a plaintive whine. The chanting took on a soothing tone. Grumbling at the imposition, the reactor of the *Hrafnkel* burned hotter, a caged star more potent than the feeble twins the ship approached. The press of acceleration weighed on the bodies of the crew, and the stars swelled with increasing rapidity. With the certainty of an avalanche, the Vlka Fenryka's void ships moved towards the gulf between the subsidiary suns of Trisolian.

The binaries were small and red, reckoned cool for stars. Such stellar objects were common, and though prone to fitful effusions of radiation, they were largely benign. Many habitable worlds orbited their sort in short years, close in, where seasons passed in the space of weeks and the sky was always ruddy.

Not so the Trisolian twins. At a mere fifty million kilometres apart they were greatly perturbed by one another's gravity wells, and the primary star's influence exacerbated that. Plumes of incandescent gases arced out from them towards their opposites, like the arms of lovers who could not quite touch. The space between was a boiling cauldron of natural plasmas and energetic particles. Already, at fifty million kilometres away, the shields of the Vlka Fenryka's void craft sparkled with particular interference. Russ glanced at a display in an augur pit, his post-human eyes able to pick out the detail. His route took the fleet directly between.

Plotting a course through the gulf was fraught with risk. Gravity eddies and coronal mass ejections as deadly as any starship's weapon could rip the ships apart, but not one member of the Legion raised their voice in concern. They strained at the leash, eager to hunt. The perils of the strait meant nothing. From the dangers of the warp to the no-less-deadly breath of stars, the *Hrafnkel* eagerly flew.

'Maintain heading,' said Russ. The stars grew swiftly. The ships of the Vlka Fenryka were under full motive power, still accelerating, their velocity approaching a substantial portion of the speed of light.

Playful curlicues of fire licked out from the twinned suns to meet them. Radiation flare danced over the ships' void shields. The *Hrafnkel* groaned as it bumped over frame ructions in space time ploughed up by the stars' conflicting mass. Mortal crew moved to adjust the integrity fields that held the ship together.

'Auspexes are blind. Augur eyes and picter units non-functional, my king,' spoke a kaerl.

'Good,' said Russ. 'If we cannot see, the enemy will also be blind to our approach.'

That was the gambit. Punch through the boiling space between the stars and take Horus by surprise. Russ calculated taking the more dangerous route would gain his fleet a precious six and a half hours where they would not be seen, reducing the time of their visible passage in-system towards the *Vengeful Spirit* to a mere three. That was six and a half hours less of manoeuvring time for the arch traitor. Six and a half hours less to loose long-range torpedoes and mass strikes towards the wolf fleet.

Six and a half hours could win a war.

Russ grinned. He could imagine the look on Horus' face as the Vlka Fenryka burst out of the broiling zone between the stars, and it made him happy.

Naturally, they had to perform this feat first. Naturally, Russ expected his men to succeed.

Long ribbons of energised gas glowed across the straits. Faint at first, they grew more visible the nearer the ships sailed, sketching in the lines of conflicting rip tides. The vox was a squealing howl of competing stellar voices, angry pulses of natural radio waves that sounded, at times, as if intelligence lay behind their emissions, and secret messages were hidden within. The red light intensified. Never bright it grew thicker, until it saturated everything and wounded vision with its strength.

Alarms blared. The *Hrafnkel* entered the straits proper. Shouting kaerls raised the opacity of the oculus' armourglass. Far-flung stars went out. The suns remained, darkly forbidding.

The flagship groaned. It dropped and swerved, its course upset by the arguments of the twins. It ran the knife edge between two gravity wells, teetering one way then the other, threatening to slip down to fiery min. The activities of Russ' ship kaerls - off-worlders in the main, for the natives of Fenris were poorly suited to manning void ships - picked up tempo. They shouted their communications where before they were muted. The peaceful toil of the bridge took on the aspect of battle, but this time, physics itself was their foe.

Electric squalls battered at the shields. Gravity fluctuations made the *Hrafnkel* yaw and dive. The ride was bumpier than an ice-rigged wolf ship riding over rocky beaches. They were deep in the straits now. The twin suns framed the edges

of the oculus with their round bellies, the *Hrafnkel* so close to them that the internal temperature of the ship soared, and the gaseous fringes of the suns' photospheres writhed behind the darkened armourglass. Grimnr spat on the floor to ward off maleficarum. He was not the only one.

'It is a vision of Hel,' he said. 'They are souls burning in torment.' A hundred and forty years Blackblood had sailed Uppland and been party to all the wonders of Imperial science. Superstition died hard.

The fleet drove on, accelerating all the while. The suns pressed in, threatening to slam together and crush the ship. On the far side of the straits the cool safety of the void beckoned.

'We're nearly through!' shouted an exuberant brother. The Long Fangs among the pack voiced disapproval.

'You will bring misfortune on us!' chided one.

'Never count on land before it is beneath your feet,' agreed Russ.

The brother was chastened.

'Too late,' said Grimnr. He made a warding eye on his forehead, curving forefinger and thumb into an oval. 'Wyrd has been challenged by his unwise words, and fate never backs down.'

Klaxons sang out distress. Instruments all over the ship turned red, deepening the rubicund twilight of the stars shining through the darkened oculus.

'Solar flare!' one of the kaerls at the auspectorium screamed. They felt it before they saw it, a great push of power licking out from Trisolian 2a. The vox crackled louder, bombarded by a particle sleet a trillion strong.

Before the oculus' dimming properties reacted, the light in the bridge grew brighter. The flare passed close to the *Hrafnkel's* prow, like a fem or a whip slowly uncoiling. Its position and speed were illusory. It was a million kilometres ahead, it moved a hundred thousand kilometres a second. It was so enormous it warped perception. 'Brace for impact!' roared Grimnr.

A fractal hand of starlight swatted at the void ships as if they were flies.

Now the fleet took injury. A miscalculation saw a squadron of torpedo boats veer from the solar flare too steeply. Their trajectory put them hard into the fronds of its trailing side. Two were consumed instantly, their shields overloaded and hulls stripped back to the frame by roiling, multicoloured plasmas. The third was wracked by the flare's electromagnetic fields. Its light went out, its engines guttered to nothing, and it tumbled, powerless, towards the outer layers of the nearest star.

Russ' kaerls moved to save it. They sent messages that could not reach it. They hailed ships that could not catch it. They looked at their lord expectantly, willing him to find a way.

'Leave it,' said Russ, staring ahead. 'If we slow, we will lose more lives.' As he commanded, so he was obeyed. The ship was abandoned to its fate.

The starboard star responded to its brother's entreaty, shooting out its own curling lash. In return, the first sent another, and so on, until the void screamed with burning atoms and the Vlka Fenryka flew pell-mell down a twisting gut of fire. Imperial ships were mighty tools of war, but nothing made by man can compete with a star, even ones so puny as the Trisolian binary. Instruments overloaded in showers of sparks, their circuitry fried by a surfeit of the Motive Force. The priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus moaned, and the Vlka Fenryka could not say if it was in fear or ecstasy. The cruiser *Valhall* detonated. A dozen escorts were overwhelmed. Void shields all over the fleet buckled under the attentions of the binary as they were beaten hard by stellar scourges.

The punishment abated. The tremors subsided.

'We're down to our last shield bank,' announced the kaerl of the aegis. 'The next one will tear us in half.'

'Charge all the capacitors. I want every void generator operating at peak capacity,' said Russ. 'Take power from the engines. Strengthen the aegis.'

A final blast of power from Trisolian 2b ripped away the blanket of energy protecting the *Hrafnkel*, leaving it exposed to the binary stars' wrath.

'Stand by for hull impact!' yelled the kaerl of the auspex.

The blow did not land. The fury of the stars subsided. No more flares burst from the spheres.

'They have had their fill of violence,' said Russ. He relaxed his hands. They were gripping hard at the arms of his throne.

As he pronounced those words, the *Hrafnkel* burst through the gravitic envelope, and sailed into calmer space. The drag of the suns lessened, and the fleet pulled free.

Damage reports came in thick and fast. There had been many casualties, RUSH did not hear them. He had his eye fixed on the primary tacticaria. The main world of the system was an icy moon orbiting a gas giant. Seven large facilities were suspended high over its surface on tall, macro-sized tether-tubes. Around it, caught unawares, was the fleet of Horus Lupercal.

'I count more than fifty capital ships. Word Bearers, Alpha Legion, Sons of Horus, World Eaters, Iron Warriors. By the heart of Fends, it's a feasting table of traitors. The whole lot of them are here,' said Grimnr.

'They are spread across the system,' said Russ. 'We have them unawares.' He frowned. 'And my huscarl, this is only a fraction of Horus' forces. Can Horus really be here with such a poor fleet? The *Vengeful Spirit*, can you see it? Is he here? Find him!'

'Yes, my jarl,' responded the auspex kaerl. Then, a moment later: 'I have it.'

'Bring the *Vengeful Spirit* to prominence in the tacticaria,' said Russ.

Auspex feeds were adjusted, and within the hololith's ball of light the *Vengeful Spirit* grew from an anonymous sliver of metal to a vast, space-borne fortress.

'There he is,' growled Russ. 'Make all speed towards the Warmaster, my sons.'

'Yes, my lord!' his servants responded.

'Such a small distance,' said Russ. 'Close for the murder-make!' he commanded. Today, we shall see a reckoning.'

TWENTY

Fury Of Fenris

Friedisch was on shift when Cawl marched in and hauled him out from his work station by the elbow.

'Domina Magos Hester Aspertia Sigma-Sigma wishes to see him,' he said to the supervising tech-priest. The man waved them out with a complete lack of interest. No one liked to go against the domina, especially now.

Unlike Friedisch's place of toil, the corridor Cawl hustled him along was brightly lit, and Friedisch's human eye screwed up against the change in illumination.

'What are you doing? Aren't you supposed to be seeing to your troops?' he said mockingly.

'What's that attitude for?'

'I never saw you as a warrior, Belisarius,' said Friedisch.

'Are you jealous, Friedisch?' asked Cawl.

'No!' said Friedisch, too fervently to be believable.

'You're the one who was always pressing me to take up a specialisation,' said Cawl. 'I've had one chosen for me.' 'Then why aren't you with the thallaxii?'

Cawl glanced about to make sure they were alone I've taken an unauthorised leave of absence. 'A permanent one.'

'You're not!'

'I am,' said Cawl. 'I am leaving. I'm going to give you a choice Friedisch. I am leaving this system today.'

'How?'

Cawl bundled Friedisch into a servitor recharging bay. Six energy stands stood against the walls. Only one was occupied, the cyborg slumped in inactivity while its batteries drew power.

'Aspertia has a needle ship. Small and fast, warp capable,' Cawl said.

'I know she's got a ship!' said Friedisch snappishly. 'You can't take it.'

'I can. It's called stealing.'

'I know what it's called! You can't do it!'

'Our kind steal knowledge all the time How is a ship any different?'

'I'm going to get killed listening to this.' Friedisch made to move. Cawl shoved him into the wall.

'You'll get killed anyway,' he said harshly. 'The Space Wolves are coming here. Now.'

'The Space Wolves? The executioners?' said Friedisch quietly. 'Long-range scans picked them up twenty minutes ago. They'll be here within three hours, and they will kill us all. If they don't, being in the service of the Warmaster will. And I will not serve that traitor. Did you see him?'

'But what are we going to do?' said Friedisch in a panicked whisper. 'The domina is still doing hourly sweeps for dissent.' He shuddered. 'She dissolved the last adept who showed signs of defiance in add. Oh, by the blood of the machine, we're going to get caught!' He gave the inactive cyborg a terrified look. 'She's got ears everywhere!'

'No one can hear us!' said Cawl exasperatedly. 'Friedisch Adum Silip Qvo, I sometimes think you believe me an idiot. I have made sure no one will be aware of what I am saying to you. No one do you understand?'

Friedisch slumped and nodded.

'Serving Horus will kill us, or worse,' Cawl went on. 'Did you see his witch? Did you see *him*?'

'I was not privileged enough to be so close as you,' said Friedisch. 'It was no privilege. Count yourself lucky,' said Cawl. 'Horus Lupercal is no longer human, of any son. Nor are his servants. I have seen them up close dear friend.'

'He promised knowledge,' said Friedisch. 'Forbidden knowledge. Are you not tempted?'

'Of course I am tempted. But sometimes forbidden knowledge is forbidden for good reason. We have to get out of this place.'

'I don't know. Domina Aspertia says…'

'Never mind what Aspertia says!' snapped Cawl. 'She's wrong. You can't serve creatures like Horus and profess the neutrality of knowledge. High principles are no defence against the kind of corruption Horus' service brings.' He gritted his teeth. 'Knowledge can never be neutral. She has fallen prey to the limitations of human thought.'

'What do you mean?' said Friedisch.

'She is convinced she is right, as everyone with an opinion is convinced they are right.' Cawl stared hard at his wide-eyed friend. 'The truth is, no one ever is. The assumption of truth blinds one to the shading of actuality. It's all subjective. We can only do the best we can, and she has made the wrong choice.'

'The Warmaster is probably going to win, you realise that,' said Friedisch. He was already defeated, already giving in. 'He's going to take Terra. It might be better to be on the winning side.'

Cawl punched his friend hard in the chest.

'What did you do that for?' Friedisch said, shocked.

'I'm knocking some sense into you, fool, it is probable that Horus will win,' admitted Cawl. 'But some things are too precious to be left to the whims of probability! If we all give in, he will win for certain. Every one of us that defies him lessens his chances,' Friedisch's eye narrowed. 'Hang on, if I decide not to come with you…' His gaze fell on Cawl's serpenta.

Cawl gave Friedisch an angry, meaningful look.

'Now I'm a murderer?' he said after a moment's uncomfortable silence. 'I'll rely on you keeping your mouth shut. I'm not going to kill you if you don't come with me, but that's all academic, because you are coming with me.'

'You're making a big mistake, I just know it,' said Friedisch.

'I assure you, I am not,' said Cawl. 'Action is the instigator of success. If we stay, we will die.'

Friedisch's face screwed up with the agonies of indecision.

'Oh, very well!'

'Good. We are going now. We need to cross Momus to the other side of the Heptaligon. Aspertia has her ship in a private dock in Septa station's tube-tether. We've got a lot of ground to cover, and precious little time to do it.'

For the second time in a month, Trisolian found itself under attack. The Space Wolves drove relentlessly to the centre of the Warmaster's fleet, making directly for the *Vengeful Spirit* itself. As Horus' command ship was moored at the capital, Heptaligon was caught in the centre of the storm. Before Cawl and Friedisch had made it halfway to their destination, the tiny moon and its parasitic stations rocked to the pounding of loyalist guns. Beyond the flimsy walls of the facility the Legion fleets were locked in battle, ferocious as brawling animals.

The tech-adepts abandoned the main ways as soon as the Space Wolves began landing raiding parties, and moved to the lesser tubules linking the massive tube-tethers. These were fragile, but unimportant, and Cawl was banking on them being empty of combatants and therefore safer. His decision seemed erroneous to Friedisch, as the tube they traversed was swaying dangerously, metal and plastek moving liquidly as the tube-tethers it budded from came under bombardment. Friedisch clutched at Cawl's arm.

'We can't get away,' he moaned. 'We'll never be able to steal her ship.'

'We can, now shut up,' said Cawl. He stopped the transit cart he'd liberated, and waited to ride out the ripples in the corridor. The station settled, groaning with metallic pain as its fabric tore under the stress. Breezes gusted over them, carrying the rumour of far-off decompressions.

'Fine,' said Cawl. He set the cart into motion again. Its angled wheels gripped the sides of the narrow tubeway, propelling them down it at high speed. Lights flickered by, blurring into streaks.

An explosion nearby shook the floor. Cawl did not stop this time. Friedisch's face slammed into the roll cage of the cart and he howled in pain. Lumens flickered out. Smoke poured from atmospheric recycling units, hazing the air. Tez-Lar stood solid as a rock on the back of the cart, heavy duty magclamps making him as imperturbable as a statue.

Blood spurted from Friedisch's broken nose. 'That was a hit! A hit on the tube! We should have stuck to the main way.'

'The main way is full of legionaries!' shouted Cawl over the rush of the wind.

Another hit crimped the corridor's sides. Air whooshed loudly through holes in the metal. Cawl braked with a second to spare, coming to a halt, tyres smoking, a mere metre before the damaged section. The floor was concertinaed, and impassable.

'The cart won't make it over that. We'll have to walk. There's the door at the end. We're nearly there.'

'We're going to die!'

'Move!' Cawl shouted. The door out of the corridor lay a few hundred metres ahead. Cawl dragged Friedisch up from the cart seat. 'Move!'

Head bowed, shoulders set, Cawl half dragged the other tech-priest behind him towards the door. Tez-Lar clambered from the cart and thumped after them. The spar shook again, whipping about like a wounded snake. Cawl tumbled down the way like a stone rattled in a rations tin. He came to rest, his head spinning, and could not rise Maybe Friedisch was right. Maybe they were going to die Chemical smoke burned his nostrils. His eyes watered. The battle was coming closer. The explosions were louder. Alarms screamed from every quadrant. An iron grip snapped closed around his robes. Tez-Lar hauled him to his feet. Friedisch dangled from the servitor' s other manipulator. Tez-Lar plodded forwards as if the floor were completely still.

They passed through the door. Tez-Lar cast them into a corridor full of blessedly clear air.

Its machine-spirit honking out a doleful warning, the door closed, and a blast door slammed over the top, sealing the spar way for good. Cawl scrambled up to an armourglass window.

The void sparkled like bright sunlight on water. Ships passed each other at insanely close quarters, rolling over as they brought their full complement of weapons to bear. Void shields blazed with impact displacement. Vessels drifted, ablaze from stem to stem.

At the centre of this storm of war the *Hrafnkel* grappled with the *Vengeful Spirit*. Cawl recognised them both, such was their fame. They were brothers, equally immense, Gloriana-class battleships of the largest sub-patterns. Their kilometres-long bulks made the Heptaligon and its host moonlet seem pathetic in

size. They were old warriors now, diminished in potency by war, but still deadly, and still determined to kill. Broadsides belched from the massive guns ranged along each ship's flanks, hammering into their opposite number, trading punches like ageing pugilists unwilling to give in. Their shields crackled with lightning. They were committed to a brutal slogging match that would end only when the strongest combatant remained alone, bloody but standing.

The Heptaligon suffered for its role as battlefield. The Space Wolves were not neglecting the station. Heavy bombardment blasted columns of shattered ice from the surface of Momus that escaped easily from the weak gravity well. Seconda Station had broken free from its tower, and floated away with strange serenity, like a leaf in a stream. Its mooring collapsed slowly towards Momus, spewing burning atmosphere from the ragged end. Space Marine gunships duelled over the moon. There were even, he saw, groups of warriors wearing void jets fighting outside. Cawl was no expert in the field of void war, but he thought the Space Wolves unlikely to make it out of the system. The Warmaster's subsidiary fleets, comprising elements of the many Legions loyal to him, were moving in from the other small worlds to join the battle. Russ' Legion faced a large part of the Sons of Horus. The skill of the VI Legion was widely known, but they were outnumbered at least two to one. Cawl could think of only one good reason why Leman Russ would be behaving so.

Friedisch's pallid, nervous face appeared at Cawl's shoulder.

'This is suicide!' he said.

'They have come to kill the Warmaster,' said Cawl. 'Isn't it obvious? Leman Russ has committed his entire Legion. He's the Emperor's executioner. He's come for the Warmaster's head.'

'Look!' shrieked Friedisch. He pointed with a shaking finger.

Cawl turned to look. The tube-spars surrounding the trunk of the Septa station were coming apart. Some attacks were targeted upon the giant shaft, but many appeared to be incidental to the battle going on around the moonlet. The Heptaligon's void shielding was minimal, graded only to protect the station from cosmic debris. A missile struck the weakened tube he and Friedisch had exited. The resulting explosion turned a fifty-metre section into a glittering haze of particulates. Tethering hawsers snapped like spider's silk The spar bent away from the trunk of the tower, until acceleration and material stress sheared it off and it floated away to add to the growing mass of battle debris. The trunk was as yet firm, but was marked with many holes, and it vibrated with the impact of city-levelling weaponry. It would not stay intact forever.

'Blood of the machine,' said Friedisch. 'That could have been us.'

'They're coming,' said Cawl.

Shoals of boarding torpedoes rocketed out from a frigate that dipped low towards the Septa shaft. The frigate was under attack and coming apart even as it disgorged its armies. Dozens of the torpedoes were obliterated by raging point defence fire, but far more made it through. A different sort of impact shook the tower. Shortly after, new noises reached them from down the endless corridor, a throaty howling and the awful flat banging of Space Marines small-arms fire.

Friedisch pawed at Cawl's shoulder, pulling his attention away from the battle outside. He found it fascinating. There was so much information in the dance of starships and the patterns of fire exchange. It was beautiful. He was no longer afraid. He no longer feared death.

The same could not be said of Friedisch.

'Cawl,' he said.

The noise of feral warriors echoed up the way. It was impossible to tell where it was coming from, but past the vanishing point, destructive light flashed.

Cawl nodded. 'We need to move on.'

'They sound so savage,' Friedisch said in terror. 'Who would make something like them?'

'The Emperor had His reasons.' Cawl looked out of the window at the battle again, where men who were once brothers tore each other apart. That was why the Space Wolves were made. They were watchdogs, created to guard against betrayal.

'Are you sure we're choosing the right side?'

'My friend,' said Cawl. 'In this war, there is only the least bad side, and we are on it. Come on. Let's go.'

Cawl went ahead. Friedisch dithered, looking back down the long outer corridor of the tether-tube, trying to guess where the battle was.

'But Cawl, where are you going?' Friedisch called after his friend. 'The domina keeps her ship in the mid-range docking halls. That way.' He pointed at a maintenance door set into the floor that led inwards, towards the hollow core of the tower and the giant expressway that ran from Septa, through Momus and up the tether-tube of Prima.

Cawl looked ahead, which, in relation to the moon, was up towards the station at the end of the trunk and the void beyond.

'We're not going to her ship just yet. We have to pay the domina herself a visit. And we have to get there before the Space Wolves do.'

'You never said we were going to do that! You said we were going to steal her ship!'

'We are,' said Cawl. He set off. Tez-Lar lumbered after him.

'But Cawl! They'll be going after her, they'll kill us!' Friedisch shouted up the corridor until he realised that Cawl would not listen to him. At a loss as to what to

do, he hurried after.

Leman Russ had his assault launch before the *Vengeful Spirit's* shields were down.

In their dozens, the Thunderhawks, Fire Raptors, Storm Eagles, assault rams, assault pods, boarding torpedoes and Stormbirds of the Vlka Fenryka raced across the narrowing gap between the two flagships, carrying three Great Companies into the den of the enemy. Tra, Sep and Tolv were granted the honour of serving their king so boldly. Explosions filled the void around them, seeking to bring them down. Anti-fighter and anti-munition guns added their loads of death to the tempest raging between the flagships. It was a desperate action. Only a general with one goal and no requirement of survival would mount a charge that final. The Vlka Fenryka knew what it meant to cross that gap, but they did so willingly.

Many gunships were lost, cored out by las-beam and shell. The pride of the Vlka Fenryka burned in space. But for every boarding craft lost, another five hundred metres was gained. With the blood of his sons, Leman Russ bought entry into the embarkation deck of the *Vengeful Spirit*.

They penetrated the void shields at a reckless pace, their velocity close to the speed that would trip the energy field's displacement response. Their pilots howled with battle joy as they passed into the space beyond the shield's protection and accelerated. Behind them boiled a wall of fire where the Hrafnkel's ordnance encountered the void shields' barrier. Ahead the sides of the enemy's flagship rose high. Occasional shells made it through the shields, annihilating themselves against plasteel ramparts in balls of flame, adding to the deep scarring marring the *Vengeful Spirit's* plating. Turrets swung into action. Streams of laser light and tracer shells converged on the attacking transports. Gunships exploded, their fragments pinwheeling away, casting dead Space Marines into the cold grave of space. The gunships' own weapons remained silent, holding their might back for the defences around the embarkation deck.

The last of the *Vengeful Spirit's* void shields guttered out in a blaze of violet flame, and the full wrath of the *Hrafnkel* vented itself against the hull. Dozens more transports followed the first wave. Their path covered by thunderous broadsides, the gunships dropped low, and angled upwards, streaming towards the wide hangar slots of the embarkation deck.

Blast doors covered over the vulnerable entrances. Hails of missiles powered away from the Thunderhawks' wings to remove these obstacles. The attack craft swooped in tightly formed flights, discharged their most potent weapons and peeled away to allow the next formation to take aim. Mounds of flame briefly built themselves up. They fell away like curtains, to show blast doors that had become the mouths of metal caves.

Russ' squadrons now broke apart. Many flew directly towards the embarkation deck, braving the lattices of lascannon fire from the emplacements covering the entrances. The rest peeled away to land parties elsewhere to support Terminator squads teleporting in from the *Hrafnkel*, or to shoot down fighters chasing boarding torpedoes sent to penetrate the upper decks.

All across the Space Wolves fleet, breaching craft and boarding torpedoes took flight, heading for the *Vengeful Spirit's* supporting vessels. Following the lessons of nature's swarming insects, they relied on sheer numbers to get them through. Thousands died. The attack seemed reckless, ill thought out. But every move was made with cold calculation. Casualties were but one factor in Russ' plan, a cost to be borne, as the Great Wolf committed his entire Legion to the single purpose of killing the Warmaster.

In a strobing flash of engines from hundreds of launching ships, every remaining warrior of the Rout went to war.

TWENTY-ONE

Into The *Vengeful Spirit*

Russ' Stormbird *Hugin* came shrieking into the embarkation deck through decompression gales. Bodies and loose objects bounced from its faring as it slewed into the vast hangars. His pilots were the best the Legion had. Precisely aimed bolt-fire cut down dozens of warriors rushing to drive out the boarders. Missiles screamed away from its wings, wreaking havoc among the ships parked along the deck's huge landing aprons.

More and more gunships roared through the compromised blast doors. Explosions ballooned from missile impact points and died, their flames sucked prematurely away by the howling wind. Sound lost its potency as the air thinned. Barrels of promethium, ammo pallets, loaders - anything not chained to the deck slid along the floor under the battering windstorm. Lighter objects were upended completely and sent hurtling out of the breaches.

Hugin put down. Void shields flexed around it presenting a protective dome that turned aside the returning fire of the traitors. The doors opened, and the Varagyr, Leman Russ' personal guard, poured out.

They were met by the Sons of Horus. Hate flared on both sides. The loyal Legion slammed into the traitors' shield walls and firing positions, overtaken with killing frenzy and desirous only of slaughter. Killing fields before the numerous bunkers built into the walls cut down many of the first out of the ships, but the gunships deployed their heavy weapons to break them down, and fire support teams fanned out to add to the barrage. The volleys sent to and fro were murderous, killing a great many of Russ' sons in the open spaces of the deck before they could close with the foe, but here and there they made it into melee range, and moment by moment the volume of the traitors' fire declined. By then the first wave was down, and more were arriving. Howling like beasts, they rushed through doors and rents deeper into the ship. Soon enough the Sons of Horus were locked in combat blade to blade with Vlka Fenryka.

Bjorn was among them, taken on board Russ' personal transport. He ran out with the first warriors, keener to be away from the primarch's side than he was to engage the enemy. It was an honour to be favoured by Russ, but he had not earned it, not in the eyes of his brothers, and not in his own mind. He fought alongside warriors decades older than himself when all he longed for was the

company of his old pack. He was wyrd-marked, a bad star. He had never asked for this lofty fate.

Mass-reactive rounds detonated against Bjorn's pauldrons as he ran ahead of all others, marking an access door let into the deck's thick walls as his target. He had a melta charge in his good hand before he reached it, diving below the gunfire blasting out of the loopholes either side of the door to slam the device home. He threw himself to the left as it went off. Thermal reaction spread across the door, turning plasteel bright white with heat. It collapsed into steaming slag. Bjorn dashed through. The enemy were waiting for him, but he attacked without fear, eviscerating the first Traitor Space Marine with his claws, and striking the head from the second while he was drawing his pistol.

Bjorn loped on, alone. He forced his way into a bunker at the base of a reinforcement buttress, but found the occupants dead, their armour burnt and flesh flash-evaporated by a plasma cannon hit.

The *Vengeful Spirit* shook with the discharge of its main armament, and trembled with the returning impact of the Fenrisian fleet's weapons. Bjorn looked out of the firing slot. There were few Sons of Horus left alive. His brothers were winning. The wind dropped as blast doors sealed entrances to the deck. Resistance was dwindling, bracketed into pockets that allowed more gunships to enter without harrying fire. Automatic turrets were shut down or blasted to pieces, but the deck was far from theirs.

The embodiment of war walked the embarkation deck. Russ had come out of his ship, and was directing his warriors. He bore the Emperor's Spear in full battle for the first time. The Vlka Fenryka were splitting into preassigned hunting parties, heading off towards different parts of the giant vessel. Bjorn glimpsed his own pack, and watched them jog off with a unity of purpose he missed. The air had all vented from the hangar, but in minutes, the decompression wind would blow again as the Space Wolves fought their way from their beachhead and out into the body of the void ship.

A moment of relative calm intruded into the tempest of war. Bolt-gun fire petered out, surrendering to the quieter background fury of discharging ship cannons and returning impacts. The *Vengeful Spirit* shook as it fought, but the lack of atmosphere made the deck weirdly quiet, quiet enough for Bjorn's own breathing to sound loudly in the confines of his helmet, quiet enough for him to become aware of a pressure inside his head. Beneath the rumble of his twin hearts he could hear, or thought he could hear, a hundred whispered voices.

Bror Tyrfingr had warned the Rout about the maleficarum that afflicted the flagship. Every warrior bore protective runes blessed by the gothi. Bjorn looked at the stamped lead ovals tied by cord to his wrist. They showed hot in his helm's

thermal overlay though the temperature in the embarkation deck had dropped close to the killing chill of the void.

He would have spat if he had his face free of the helm. Instead he touched the lead panels for luck, took out his combat knife, and carved a warding eye into the lintel over the bunker door.

The voices didn't like that: they spoke louder, almost loud enough for him to hear. If he could just catch what they were saying… A dirty taste filled his mouth, choking him, pressing against the back of his eyes.

The vox buzzed in his ears, startling him away from the lure of the maleficarum. The voices vanished. He shook his head. The feeling of uncleanness would not lift. Shakily, he sheathed his knife. Russ' growl reached out to the task force.

'To your tasks, my Wolves,' he said. 'Wreak destruction where you can, bring the murder-make to every corner of this corrupted vessel. Ignite the pride of my brother. Cause such havoc he will come willingly to my spear. Lure him out. Bring him to me!'

The vox clicked as it switched to a private channel.

'Bjorn, to my side,' Russ said to Bjorn alone. 'Don't leave my sight again. Our wyrd is entwined. Fate demands you fight with me.'

Chastened by the tone in the Lord of Winter and War's voice, Bjorn went to rejoin his primarch.

Bror Tyrfingr fought with his brothers again.

He dropped ten metres from the tilted mouth of his boarding torpedo onto the space beside the ventral gun deck's ammunition runnel. The boom of his impact on the deck plating would have woken the dead. Thralls scattered before him, terrified by the Vi's arrival.

Mechanicum overseers in black and red whirled scourges over heads, driving emaciated gun crews at the boarders. Bror made sure to drop a few with his bolt pistol before he smashed into the crowd. The sheer mass of the crew delayed the Space Wolves while alarms called for reinforcement from better troops.

Bror's pack was at the back of the gunnery deck. Other torpedoes bored their way in closer to the still firing macrocannons, sending sheets of molten metal and ignited insulation showering onto the luckless mortals. Burning men ran screaming from their stations. A rising hail of boltgun fire cut down hundreds. One torpedo came straight in through the atmospheric shielding that warded the deck from space. It bounced hard through the mass of slaves, smearing them to paste, burst through a pile of stacked shell pallets and came to a rest near a maintenance crane. The ramp bolts blew, and the occupants dashed out into the thick of the mortals, the rise and fall of their weapons causing a red rain.

Bror slew the wretches, though it brought him no pleasure. He barged them over the railing of the runnel where shell sleds raced back and forth, he cut them down with his sword. The mass-reactives from his bolt pistol blew them into bloody scraps. Better-equipped armsmen poured in from entrances at both ends of the gallery, led by wailing priests. They came at the Space Wolves with admirable courage, but their shotguns could not penetrate Legiones Astartes battleplate. Bror turned to face the new threat. High-velocity pellets pinked off ceramite like handfuls of cast stones. He blasted three armsmen down, their carapace suits cracked easily by his bolt pistol. When Bror atomised the skull of their cult leader, they wavered. Tyrfingr howled, ran into the group and cut four more down with his chainsword, driving them back. They could not stand before him, and the last few fled back the way they had come. Blind Ragner brought a couple down with improbably accurate shots. The rest vanished into the warren of connected tunnels joining the gun deck to deeper parts of the ship.

Across the gun deck the situation was repeated. Packs of Vlka Fenryka scoured the gallery free of life, gunning or cutting down whoever they found.

There were six left from Bror's pack. Ragner, Himmlik, Enrir the Fat, Chattering Flokr, Gren the Happy and himself. The rest had died while he had been on Terra with Malcador, slain in this traitor's war.

Bror took a moment to catch his bearings. The open mouth of their torpedo poked at a steep angle through the ceiling. Rivulets of cooling metal ran down the plating. Acoustic baffling smouldered around the edge of the breach. They had come in well, right on target. Icons flashed on the cartolith displayed on his helmplate: the locator signals of more torpedoes arriving around the main gun decks.

He looked around. He grinned to himself. Up on the wall near the head of an iron stair leading to the gun deck was a fiitharc inscription, carefully hidden behind a bunch of dangling cables. Somewhere nearby would be the locator beacon, planted even beyond his capacity to see by Rama Karayan or Iacton Qruze. Both were dead, but their deeds were bearing fruit.

The previous occasion he had come this way he had been stealthy and the gun deck had been empty. The idea of stealth seemed a rich joke. When the Vlka were finished the guns would never speak again, but the runnel presented an aural wall of mechanical clattering still. Shell sleds the size of armoured personnel carriers whizzed up and down the tracks, pulled by man-thick chains whose links blurred with speed. As one sled rushed up, full of ordnance, another shot back down on the neighbouring line, carrying enormous casings still smoking from their discharge from the next gun bay. They were close enough to the runnel's terminus to hear the deafening clanging as the casings were tipped into chutes leading directly to the *Vengeful Spirit's* forges.

'Where are the dogs of Horus?' said Enrir. 'Why do we have to fight these lowly worms?'

'Pity them,' said Himmlik. He turned one over with his boot. The man's expression was fixed with terror. A natural reaction to encountering the Rout, but the lines in his face suggested he had worn that expression for a long time. He was filthy, malnourished, his limbs stick-thin and covered with sores. Over the criss-cross of whip wounds, his uniform had gone to rags, and the skin of his forehead was inflamed around a crude, eight-pointed star carved into his flesh.

'Lowly?' Gren tore off his helmet. 'That last lot damn cracked my lens,' he said. He held the helm up to his face and wrinkled his nose at it.

'Put your helmet back on,' said Bror.

'Can't see a thing through the crazing,' said Gren miserably. 'I'll fight without.'

'Put it back on, Gren!' snarled Bror. The ship shook hard to a large impact. It was close by, probably the shell distribution node near the gun deck he and the other Knights Errant had marked for torpedo strike.

'Looks like your beacons and your runes remained undiscovered,' said Ragner.

Bror nodded. 'It pleases me the deaths of my comrades were not in vain,' he said. 'Though I never thought I'd return here to follow the marks myself.' He glanced at Gren. 'I said put your helmet back on. A lot of the marks I made were on weak points in the hull. If they're targeted, we will lose atmosphere. I don't want to have to blow air back into your lungs. You're ugly. I don't want to kiss you.'

'And he's got bad breath,' said Enrir. 'He can't stand it himself. That's why he doesn't want to wear his helm.'

Gren grumbled, but replaced his helmet.

Other wolf packs were dealing with the macrocannons, spiking them with krak grenades tossed into the breaches. Gun barrels blew out into petalled rings with flat, musical bangs. In a few moments, the VI Legion had turned a functioning cannon gallery into a ruin. Corpses were mounded in piles. Blood dripped from the walls. Any machine that dared voice a protest was riddled with bolts. Burning wads of fibrous baffling and insulation whirled around the room, casting off embers that were pulled into tight vortexes by struggling air cyclers.

'Our brothers are having too much fun,' said Bror, as another cannon died. 'Let's be useful. Take these sleds out! Stop them reloading the neighbouring battery.'

'I'll do it.' Himmlik took a krak grenade from each of them, bundled them together and set one for a timed detonation. The next time the sled came past, he casually tossed the grenades atop the fresh shells.

'I'd get back, if I were you.'

A hundred metres up the runnel, the grenades blew, setting off the explosives in the shells. The tensioned chain broke, and came scything back down the runnel so close to the Space Marines their wolf pelts rippled. Fire followed, the explosion forcing it down the runnel like a blowtorch. Temperature warnings rang in Bror's ears as the firestorm rolled past them and then sucked back, as a powerful decompression gale snatched it towards the hole the explosion had made in the hull. The winds quickened as other members of the Rout targeted the power units and control boxes for the atmospheric shielding, and blew out the pistons for the blast doors that closed when the shielding failed.

The entirety of the room's air blasted out in a terrific gust, turning to ice on the edges of the gun port apertures. Mortal corpses tumbled out. They spun away into the battle, human flotsam in an ocean of fire.

Bror maglocked his feet and leaned into the wind. When it was done, he turned to Gren.

'See?' he said by unit vox-net. 'Wear your helmet,' Lufven Close-Handed voxed his Great Company.

'Targets onn and twa taken. Target gallery tra's guns will not speak for long. The hunt goes to plan. Great Company to disperse as per prior orders. Fenrys hjolda!'

The vox cut out. The wolf packs split. Already the sounds of battle sounded over the company vox from the next gun gallery.

'Our next kill is the munitions hold,' said Bror. 'A big prize for worthy warriors.'

'Ha, you flatter us, you dog!' said Enrir. 'They only chose us for that because you've been here before. It's the deepest target.'

'I didn't make it that far last time,' admitted Bror.

'We should have left the sleds active,' said Gren miserably.

'But it was a good explosion,' said Himmlik. 'I like a good explosion.' He patted the cloth satchel filled with melta flasks he wore at his hip. 'May there be many more.'

'We could have ridden all the way into the magazine, now we're going to have to walk,' grumbled Gren.

'No, brother,' said Bror, 'now you're going to have to run!'

Doors were breached all along the gallery. Fresh volumes of atmosphere hurried out to leap into space. The Vlka Fenryka pushed into the current, howling and discharging their weapons as they split up to take ruin onwards into the ship's body.

More explosions rumbled the deck as Bror's pack pressed on to their next target.

TWENTY-TWO

Wolf Hunt

There was little resistance on the way to the magazine. Armed servitors were the toughest foes the wolf pack faced, but they were easily dealt with, if one had the knack.

Bror's pack of Long Fangs were battle cunning. A few scratches in their armour was the worst they suffered.

Bror's futharc markings had run out some time before, and not long afterwards they passed into a part of the ship devoid of life. There were refectories and common halls there, but they were empty, appearing deserted for some time.

The magazine was a tricky proposition. Buried too far in the guts of the *Vengeful Spirit* to be taken out by a hit from outside, and prodigiously armoured, it needed tackling from within, and it had been designed to foil such attempts.

The magazine was cellular in construction, being made up of giant, armoured silos arranged in multiples of six. Each group was isolated by deep chasms that ran all the way down to the bilges. Armoured panels big as fortress walls baffled the sides of the metal canyon, held out from the walls on huge pistons to absorb any detonation of the shell stores. The chasms' main purpose was to channel blast forces up and out of the ship via chimneys set high into the superstructure, but they acted as well as defensive moats as they did fire breaks. Each silo was connected by two-level retractable bridges to the greater body of the ship. On the top were companionways of open mesh. Below them were the railroads for the shell loaders.

Fortunately for the Rout, the bridges remained extended. Some of the magazines were inactive, cut off from the guns by the Vlka Fenryka's sabotaging of their rail lines. Most kept up a constant squealing rattle of wheels on tracks as servitor carts dragged shells from the stores and took them away to the batteries.

They selected the middle silo in the central group of six for detonation.

A pair of twinned autocannons in turrets were slung under their target's gate arch. They panned back and forth in monotonous sweeps, their augur eyes glowing a baleful red.

Bror took up a forward position in cover by the bridge. Deep shadows dominated the space behind the baffles. The canyons were lit a twilight blue, but by contrast to the backs of the baffles they seemed bright and open.

'Enrir,' Bror voxed. He kept the message brief. The turrets were of a sophisticated mark, and were doubtless scanning for vox broadcasts. Enrir came forwards stealthily.

'Can you hit them with your meltagun?' Bror asked. Enrir carried the weapon as a supplement to his bolt gun. It went against Legion organisational doctrines, but the Rout had never been one to follow rules.

Enrir leaned forwards.

'Those turrets are forty-six metres away, the extreme edge of the beam focus. I can do it, but I'll be able to take only one turret down. The other will open fire as soon as I claim the first for Morkai.' Bror patted his pauldron. 'Do it. Take the left. The rest of you, target the right. And be quick. The lack of sentries here is making me nervous.'

Enrir set his boltgun down quietly. He undamped his meltagun from the side of his power plant. He sighted it carefully, and adjusted the focal length of the fusion beam with a dial on the housing. He brought the weapon to bear, stock close in to his shoulder. He looked down at the iron sight on the barrel end. Fusion weapons were intended for close-range work. They didn't need aiming too carefully under ordinary circumstances.

'On tra,' said Bror. 'Onn, twa, tra!'

Enrir squeezed the trigger carefully so as not to disturb his aim. The air shimmered between the gun and the autocannon turret. The efficacy of the beam was reduced so far away, and the turret had time to come to bear before Enrir burned through it, setting off the ammunition stores inside. Cooked off shells spiralled outwards.

The second turret immediately opened fire with a sawing chug, driving Enrir back behind the armoured baffle. Bror and the others responded in kind, but their bolts exploded on the armoured exterior of the turret, doing little damage.

'My apologies, fat one, but you're going to have to brave the iron rain and take that second one out!' Bror shouted.

Enrir nodded. He adjusted the settings on his gun, then threw himself back around the corner and fired.

A large, solid round smashed Enrir's right pauldron from his shoulder with violent force. The edge of the plate ripped open his body glove and cut his flesh down to the bone of his shoulder blade before bouncing off the wall near Gren's head and falling into the chasm. Enrir was turned about by the hit. His meltagun flew from his hands and slid over the edge of the drop. He cursed hard, enraged by the loss of his favourite gun rather than the wound he had taken. His brothers returned fire with a punishing hail of bolt-rounds.

The autocannon turret opened fire again, but its shells whistled harmlessly over the pack. Though its machine-spirit lived, the mechanisms that drove it were

fused solid by Enrir's shot. Ragner put a bolt precisely into its augur lenses, blinding it. He advanced, bolt-gun up. The turret attempted to turn but could not, and voided its magazines uselessly into the armoured baffles.

'I'd run now,' Ragner said to his brothers, and sprinted for the magazine door.

The turrets guarding other silo entrances opened fire on the pack as they dashed across the bridge. Ragner was hit, but the round skidded off the curves of his plate, eliciting little more than an oath from the wolf. Bror attempted to help Enrir to his feet, but the warrior waved him away and got up himself. They made it to the entrance of the magazine, hurling themselves into the cover of the silo's vestibule with a series of crashing impacts. A thick blast door barred the way.

'Burn it through!' Bror shouted over the booming of a dozen autocannons.

Himmlik pulled a melta charge from his cloth satchel and slammed it onto the door. Seconds later, the way was open.

Bror stepped through the steaming breach into the shell store.

A floor level with the upper deck of the bridge divided it into two storeys, and through the grille of the deck panels he could see automated mechanisms at work loading the shells onto their transit sleds.

The shells, each the height of a legionary, were stored in dozens of tall hoppers that fed downwards into the sled bays. A high rail coming in from the far side allowed the hoppers to be refilled, but the aperture that it entered through was currently sealed. The shells clunked down with loud, decisive noises, selected from the stacks to some machine optimised pattern that looked random to Bror's eyes. The walls were a delicate lime-green made lurid by counterseptic ultraviolet lumens.

All this Bror had expected to see. What he didn't expect were the organic threads linking the control panels across the narrow ways between hoppers. They clogged the space with a stringy web, their roots buried deep in the machinery of the magazine. Where they touched the metal, slabs of rippled flesh coated parts of the walls, dripping with clear slime.

Gren came through after him, and stopped.

'What have they done to the machines?'

Bror drew his combat knife and probed the sinews. They quivered. When he cut through one, it bled. 'It's… it's flesh,' he said.

'The traitors tamper with the evils of the Underverse,' growled Himmlik.

'You are a gothi now, my brother?' said Gren, but his challenge was voiced uneasily.

'Don't touch it,' said Enrir.

'Good advice,' said Bror. 'Plant the charges, then leave this place.'

'Here!' Himmlik unslung his satchel, emptied it and tossed melta devices to his brothers. Enrir kept a lookout from the door as the others locked the charges in

place.

'How's your shoulder?' asked Bror.

'I'll live.' Enrir touched the wound. Sealant foam mixed with blood scabbed over the rent in his body glove, but the hole was too large to be closed. He had lost the whole outer plate and the nested layers beneath.

'Don't get any of this skjitna muck on it,' Bror warned. 'Morkai's breath!' He swore as an eye opened in the flesh covering half a shell stack. It followed him as he moved through the flesh web to plant the final charge. He put a bolt-round into it. Yellow pus fountained from the impact site. Something living shrieked within mechanisms. 'Doner Ragner railed.

'Me too,' Raid Gren. The auspex chimed loudly. Gren swore and plucked it from his belt. 'We've got company,' growled Gren. 'Multiple inbound targets.'

'The Sons of Horus?' said Enrir. His teeth were gritted against the pain of his wound, but his words were glad. 'I want to shoot something more challenging than deck thralls.'

'No such luck,' said Gren. He looked up from the auspex. 'Mechanicum combat cyborgs. Hundreds of them.'

'Is there another way out than the bridge?' asked Enrir.

'Not that I know of,' said Bror.

'There isn't one on the auspex. Not on the plans either,' said Gren, twisting dials on the side of his device.

'Apart from down,' said Enrir. 'I wouldn't recommend that way.'

'Fine then,' said Ragner. 'We fight our way out.'

The tramp of metallic feet sounded down the corridor leading to the magazine.

'We go blade to blade,' said Bror. 'They'll outshoot us if we stay here. But no half-man can outfight us close in. Charge on my word.'

Leman Russ and his Varagyr cut their way into the *Vengeful Spirit* with all the subtlety of an industrial auger applied to heart surgery. Rounds of howling never ceased, rippling across the dispersed battlefront, almost dying away before being taken up by another pack. The Vlka fell on the inhabitants of the ship without mercy, even as the *Hrafnkel* and the others pounded at the *Vengeful Spirit* from outside. Explosions rocked the vessel from within as packs chased down the breadcrumb trails of the Knights Errant's rune marks and locator beacons, tearing out crucial subsystems and setting supplies ablaze No other Legion could unleash such fury. And yet, to Bjorn, the Vlka's efforts did not seem enough to slay the giant flagship, large parts of the ship were already deserted, many halls designed for mortal use were airless or stale, dusty possessions scattered around the floor. Old blood stained the decking, suggesting that the occupants had been slaughtered, but in many of those places there was no sign of external breaching.

Whatever atrocity had taken place within the hull had been perpetrated by the Sons of Horus themselves.

'Bad memories cling to this place,' said Grimnr to Bjorn. Bjorn had been warned by men who wished to be his ally that Grimnr I spoke out against him to the Lord of Winter and War. Not that Bjorn I cared. He agreed with Grimnr's supposed position, so he was surprised that the warrior spoke with him at all. It was a sign of the I apprehension that gripped the Legion. The *Vengeful Spirit* felt wrong.

'A lot of bad things have happened here,' the huscarl said, then I jogged ahead.

Combat came fitfully to Leman Russ' war band. The sounds of fighting diminished the further they pressed on. The thralls they encountered, they slaughtered. Occasional ambushes stabbed at them from the darkness of the ship's labyrinth. They faced Word Bearers and Alpha Legionnaires in small groups, who came at them, killed and were killed, before vanishing back into the deeps. For all that the *Vengeful Spirit* and the *Hrafnkel* had started out as siblings, they had diverged, and the differences had amplified since the betrayal by means that transcended the physical. To Bjorn it felt that the futharc runes pinned the ship's form in place, and that without them the Rout would find itself lost in a shifting maze of service corridors and shafts that doubled back upon themselves.

If the unearthliness of the *Vengeful Spirit* were not enough to convince the Wolves of maleficarum, the voices that Bjorn had heard upon their arrival grew stronger. Snatches of words - all alien, but unmistakably malevolent - became apparent, causing the packs to pause many times in case of enemy attack. In earlier days they might have checked their vox for malfunction. Now they knew the voices for evil magic. This diagnosis of the ship's ills was brought fully home to them when the corridors they trod ceased to ring under their feet, but became moist, giving flesh that shivered when touched, as if physical contact pained it. Maws gusting mephitic gases replaced vents. Wet orifices took the place of door panels. They were small, these areas of malignant growth, but increasingly widespread, and appeared to be growing towards one another, linking up like the sprouting seeds of cancer subverting the organs of its host body. The segments of the ship suffering this flesh disease were a nightmare given form, and when left behind, memory of them faded, as if they were not truly of this reality and could not be easily comprehended by mortal minds.

'We walk through the Underverse here,' said Bjorn.

The flesh-caverns disturbed the Rout, but the gothi accompanying Russ' band had it worse. They were shaken by things Bjorn could not himself see. They behaved in ways Bjorn could not imagine Kva or his companions would have. He understood more clearly than ever what a grievous wound the loss of the best Rune Priests was to the Legion. Kva's cool head was sorely missed.

'How can the Sons of Horus not be alarmed by what is happening around them?' said Grimnr. Russ had ceased to range so far ahead of the main body, and had come in closer to his guardians, so Grimnr fell back again for a time to walk by Bjorn's side. 'If I were to follow a king in good faith, believing his cause to be just, and then that king introduced the likes of this to my world, I would sink my sword into his spine.'

'The Sons of Horus have sold themselves to ancient powers. They have crossed the boundaries the gothi speak of,' said Bjorn. 'They have gone mad, brother.'

Grimnr growled, a wet jungle sound of warning. 'It would be better if they were mad,' he said. 'I fear they are not.'

Shortly after, the Sons of Horus showed themselves, and Grimnr and Bjorn were able to form a more informed opinion as to their sanity.

They attacked as the Rout were crossing one of the ship's vast, lateral canyons. It was a cavernous space running down the neck of the ship far below the spinal way of the uppermost levels, but serving the same purpose of facilitating transit between the far-flung sections of the enormous vessel. Long steel lines for cable cars hung from pylons, and a monorail track ran dead down the centre. Bundles of cabling and pipes of all diameters clustered the sides of the chasm. But nothing moved there. Although there was no sign of direct damage, the heavy feeling of dereliction clung to the chasm. Giant, toothed blast doors had sealed the way into discrete sections. A lake of dark, stinking liquid had gathered in the chasm's base, steaming noxious vapours, and this deep in the ship the current battle was noticeable only as intermittent tremors that rippled the lake's surface.

Russ suddenly halted at the edge of a dusty bridge. He sniffed the air suspiciously, and waved his men back. The primarch looked up at the metal cliffs of the far side, scanning the open transitways and foot galleries for movement.

In the gloom there, metallic sea-green flashed between thick support pillars.

'I see them. They are coming. Take up position there.' He directed a group into the transit tunnel on the near side of the road, away from the advancing Sons of Horus. 'And you, get up into the upper galleries. Cover the far side, they will come at us in force here.'

The Vlka Fenryka's vox-net, near silent for a while but for distance count-offs and report calls, burst into sudden life.

Gunfire exploded from the far side of the canyon. Their ambush anticipated, the Sons of Horus attacked.

Horus' warriors approached in three trident prongs. The lead attack was offset from the other two, coming from the stem on the same side as the Rout along a wide, hexagonal supply route whose outer edge was open to the chasm. The route's rail trades were rusting, and detritus had been dumped in heaps along its length. Radioactive contaminants in the waste upset augur scans, so the traitors

had been able to draw close without alerting their quarry. The first notice the Rout had of their presence was a sheeting blaze of reaper cannon fire that hammered two Wolves down, scattering their remains in a hail of white-hot shrapnel and blood. A trio of Contemptor Dreadnoughts moved steadily up the tracks, laying down such a volume of fire the junction quickly became impassable.

Ceramite slammed into plasteel as the Rout made use of the junction's meagre cover. With Russ caught between the bridge and the safety of the deeper ship, two more groups of traitors moved in. They came head on, one straight down the corridor towards the bridge, the other taking up position in a high transitway opposite so they could fire down on the Rout. Boltgun fire exploded all around Leman Russ' position, blasting shiny craters into the corroded walls. The primarch wrinkled his nose at it like a wolf scowling at the rain. The noise of heavy guns joined the racket as their operators got them set up and aimed. Russ still did not retreat.

'My jarl! Get back!' said Grimnr.

'They will try to break us up and deal with us piecemeal,' said Russ. 'Fall back and consolidate.'

'They're trying to isolate you,' said Grimnr. 'We are ambushed!'

'I was counting on it.' Russ hefted the Emperor's Spear. 'I'll not be nursemaided by you, Blackblood. This is what I wanted. Horus has taken the bait.'

'We are the ones in the trap, my lord!'

'That is what he thinks. Varagyr, form up on me.'

Russ' Wolf Guard drew closer to him. Bullets and las-beams screamed off the energy fields of their Cataphractii armour. Howling and the firing of heavy weapons boomed up the transitway leading to the bridge. A fire support team had moved up, taking casualties in the process. The dead lay in scattered, broken pieces around the junction, but many others had survived and were ensconced in heavy cover. Among the howling Vlka were two warriors readying multi-meltas to fire on the Dreadnoughts.

The giant war machines broke into a run, thundering up the transitway towards the junction. The melta-gunners would not be ready in time. Behind the Dreadnoughts came dozens of Horus' sons, snapping off opportunistic fire as they pelted towards the Rout. Warriors, Bjorn among them, threw themselves into the corners where bridge met wall and aimed upwards at the groups occupying the higher ground on the canyon's other side.

'You must fall back, my lord,' shouted Grimnr over the roar and boom of incoming bolts. 'We are trapped. I will summon reinforcements from Sepp and Tra, they are near enough - in greater numbers we can take the fight to them.'

Russ cut Grimnr off with a chop of his hand. 'Do what you want, Grimnr. I will fight them now. I will not wait. I will kill them. I will not relent - not until the

slaughter brings Horus out.'

'That is no plan, my lord!' snarled Grimnr. He shot a burst of three rounds upwards. A Sons of Horus legionary fell screaming to his death.

'The bear is roused,' said Russ. 'It must be speared, or the hunters shall become the prey. That is the way of the hunt. The time for plans has passed - this is the time for deeds.' Russ brandished his spear overhead. 'Fenrys hjolda!' he bellowed.

'Fenrys hjolda,' Grimnr said. The battle cry was taken up by the rest.

Pounding, heavy iron footsteps echoed up the transitway. The first of the Dreadnoughts burst through into the junction. Mass-reactives turned its front quarter into a stunning display of ricochet sparks and micro-detonations. One of the melta gunners leaned around the corner, and opened up with his heavy weapon. The air shimmered and roared. The Dreadnought following the first took the blast full in its chest and fell down with an almighty bang, amniotic fluids boiling off the molten metal pouring from the wound. The lead machine swung round, pulverising the threat before he could fire again with a swipe of its fist.

Its rampage was cut short by the primarch. Drawing his arm back, his own armour alive with dancing bullet impacts, Russ cast the Spear of the Emperor into the back of the Contemptor. It pierced the armoured cowling of the machine's power plant. Initially, it appeared to have no effect; the machine continued to slaughter warriors at the command of the traitor who dwelled inside it But then there came the add taste of maleficarum, and purple lightning crawled all over the power plant. Black smoke and fire belched from the exhaust stacks. A grinding howl sounded from the mechanism, and it detonated, destroying the Dreadnought completely. The Vlka Fenryka were thrown aside by the blast Close by Russ, Bjorn ducked as a leg flew over his head, spinning so fast it beat an uneven thrumming from the air. The third Dreadnought stamped through the wreckage, roaring wildly, but it was skewered and felled by four lascannon beams fired from further up the transit tunnel, and slumped noisily into the wall.

Leman Russ pulled off his helmet threw back his head and howled. There was no sound like it in the galaxy: a full-throated animal call steeped in nature's music, it strengthened the soul of every member of the Rout and drove spikes of fear into their enemies. He howled again, and the fell spirit of the ship recoiled from its purity.

From all around their position, answering howls rang.

'Now the real fight begins,' said Russ. 'Slaughter them, then cross the bridge. We drive on, for the Emperor and the Imperium!'

Russ ran to fetch the spear, pulled it out of the smoking carcass of the Contemptor, and led his warriors in a charge down the tunnel.

Grey and green armour met in a resounding crash. Bjorn was forced to take cover, and only belatedly followed after, his back ringing to the impacts of bolt-

rounds fired from above.

Russ was there by then, fighting at the front.

Bjorn had seen his gene-father fight at close hand before. He had seen him dismember a Contemptor Dreadnought aboard the *Hrafnkel* He had witnessed him break Magnus the Red's back before the great pyramids of Tizca. He had seen him fight on a dozen worlds, and had seen the terrifying evidence of his battles on a hundred more.

But never had Bjorn seen Leman Russ fight with such savagery.

A wolf fights hard, but it fights carefully. Injury to an animal is a death sentence. Ordinarily Leman Russ fought like a wild animal fights, with savagery that was nevertheless tempered. Upon the *Vengeful Spirit* he abandoned restraint completely. He fought like a baresark. He wore his fury and his pain openly. For the first time since Horus had spat on his oaths of loyalty, Leman Russ faced the treacherous sons of his brother. The Spear of the Emperor buzzed through the air in wide, deadly sweeps, its leaf-bladed head opening armour like paper and destroying the bodies beneath. He cast it with such force it pierced its targets, killing them instantly, and always he ran forwards right into the enemy's guns to retrieve it, as if this once much-hated weapon had become dear to him.

His sons followed, slaughtering everything they came across, The Sons of Horus still fought with the caged ferocity they had been known for, methodical and deadly, but there was a new, frenzied edge to their battle craft, and in them the Rout found warriors every bit as deadly as themselves.

Hate flowed along with blood. The howls of the wolf kin were thick with outrage. Sorrow mingled with their anger, sorrow at the scouring of Prospero they had been tricked into, and sorrow that the dream was over. They were close to the source of all the Imperium's ills and of their own humiliation. There was too much poetry in the soul of the Fenrisians not to feel the stab of woe.

As Russ butchered his way through the outflanking force, the Wolf Guard pressed across the bridge, trusting to their Cataphractii plate to protect them from harm. A torrent of death fell on them, so they were like an ancient testudo of the Romani people assailing a castle gate. Armour can only save a man from so much, and one of the elite warriors fell, his energy field overwhelmed by heavy shot and his helm smashed by a volkite strike. His massive armoured form fell down, the bulk of it half blocking the bridge. His brothers weathered the fire and trudged over, and attacked, their howls amplified to ear-splitting heights by their armour.

Russ downed the last of the traitor group on the near side of the chasm, pinning the warrior with his spear to the metal of the wall.

'Follow the Varagyr over the bridge! Into them!' he roared. 'Paint the ways red with their life's ending!'

And he wrenched his crackling spear free, and bounded away.

Yelling terrible oaths, the Rout gathered themselves into a single group, streaming down from the higher levels of the chasm and in from halls abutting it, and charged behind the Wolf Guard to the other

The enemy were swiftly overwhelmed and the Rout left the chasm behind. Russ had enough of a hold of his senses to order the companies attacking the ship to take station and secure a route of escape. A portion of the Knights Errant's targets remained whole, but the battle was moving into its second phase. Time was running out. The wolf fleet was surrounded. Other traitor groups were converging on Momus and the dying Heptaligon. Ships were arriving in system, bursting out of the warp to join the battle. It should have been impossible to reinforce so quickly. It had been a matter of hours since the Rout committed to their attack and revealed I themselves - Horus' other fleets should not even have received notice by that juncture, but the traitors' mastery of the warp was complete. Dark powers hurried them into the fray.

There was no target for Russ' band to aim for, so he led them in slaughter's dance to lure out his brother. The primarch welcomed the ambush. He strode into their trap with the single purpose of smashing it, and he howled for more when it was done.

They kept together, fighting as one formation. Past the chasm the transverse way broadened out into a series of cavernous holds, their thick walls penetrated by tracks for supply trains. So much of a battleship's space was given over to storage. In the days of the Great Crusade, the expeditionary fleets operated for years away from Imperial space. Now these holds that had once held food and water for the ships' teeming crews, that had brought back wondrous artefacts and art, were full of weapons bound for the destruction of Terra.

Had the battle been more ordered, the Rout would have taken time to rig the supplies for detonation, but they fought now only to kill. Every force of Traitor Space Marines sent to fight them was greeted joyously, and the warriors of the Vlka gave ironic thanks to their foes for easing the job of war by bringing their bodies to the Rout's blades.

Bjorn panted lightly, like a canine. His helmet fans burred to keep his eye-lenses free of fogging. The mission count said they'd been fighting for four hours, but that meant nothing. Combat stretches time into strange shapes. Each moment could have been Bjorn's last, and so lasted an infinity, but when each encounter was done it was as if it had taken place in seconds. Many of them did.

They fought their way diagonally upwards, moving clear across the *Vengeful Spirit*, and away from the utilitarian areas of the inner ship into the grand spaces between the core and the starboard gun decks. Eventually they emerged into a large ceremonial hall.

Bjorn took a moment to get his bearings. A run of marble steps sculpted in a beautiful representation of a cataract cascaded from a high golden portal at the prow end. Tattered finely lined the walls, and small, high windows set into a ceiling painted with frescoes of the victory at Ullanor looked out into the void. Bjorn had expected maleficarum's touch to be lighter there out of the dark, where it could be seen. It was in the nature of evil to hide, but signs of Horus' new allegiance were everywhere in the hall. Statues appeared to move when not looked at. Paintings daubed in fluids not ordinarily considered as paint adorned the walls. Braziers burned with strange green-and-blue fires. The decoration of the place, where it was not subsumed into mats of living matter or drowned in the slime seeping from the wall, was cruel. It did not appear to have been altered by human hand; rather, it had changed itself. There were places where Bjorn could see it halfway accomplished, where the sober, restrained flourishes one might find anywhere in the Imperium were growing sharp edges and spikes more fit for a torturer's chamber. Some of them had been employed to inflict pain. Rotting bodies hung in agonised positions from rusting hooks.

The fell voices were loud in the hall, whispering clearly. The distraction nearly cost Bjorn his life. Battle horns blared a deafening challenge, and the walls opened.

A Sons of Horus legionary appeared out of nowhere to swing a crackling mace at his head. Bjorn ducked, and the weapon put a dent the size of Bjorn's torso into the wall. He emptied his gun into the chest of the traitor The legionary's breastplate cracked open. Power cabling parted, fizzing with escaping energy, and he staggered back. Bjorn leapt onto the warrior and slammed his lighting claw up through his opponent's chin. The back of the traitor's helmet exploded outwards in a fountain of smoking gore. Bjorn shoved the corpse off his claws with his boot and turned around, I seeking a new opponent, and found himself in the middle of a sudden battle. Warriors were emerging from panels sliding up beneath the corrupt artwork, running into the Vlka Fenryka all along their march. Bolt-fire rang out briefly before deadly blade work began. Warriors grappled everywhere. There were no battle lines. No discipline, only one duel repeated a thousand times, the dark against the light. The sense of unholy pressure grew. The air thickened. Even through his breathing unit, Bjorn felt he was choking on a sewer's filth with every breath.

Voices laughed and gabbled, issuing loudly from no human throat but seemingly coming from the air. The Sons of Horus fought undaunted by the chorus, but the Vlka Fenryka reeled at its jabbering.

A temperature gauge blinked to get Bjorn's attention, warning him of a growing chill. Hot air venting from power packs became rolling clouds of steam. Frost gathered on the hooks and spoiled finery, and yet when he glanced at his

wrist he found the lead charms drooping with heat. Before his eyes the charms melted into silver streaks that would not set, but flowed from his body to the floor, where they ran against the pull of artificial gravity as if seeking out a route of escape. Without the counter-magics to mute the voices, they grew louder, and louder, tempting Bjorn to cast down his weapons, threatening him if he did not. He did not know the language, but the meaning was horribly clear.

Two warriors moved to engage him. Their faces blurred in Bjorn's eyes and the voices laughed. They attacked while he was half-blind. Bjorn parried their blows clumsily.

Something was coming. Bjorn looked up the stairs. A light, like approaching torches flickering on a cave wall, was coming down the corridor. Foreboding preceded it. It was almost as if Bjorn could feel the shape of his wyrd bend out of true under the pressure. The whispers became a laudatory roar, singing out the praises of their champion.

The golden doors swung open.

With a rush of black terror, Horus Lupercal stepped out onto the head of the staircase and joined his sons. A bodyguard of hulking Terminators fanned out either side of him. Other warriors whose twisted faces and unnatural limbs Bjorn first took for the extravagance of a mad armourer came after.

Horus commanded all attention. In his left hand he carried a maul taller than a Space Marine. The right bore a massive gauntlet whose fingers were tipped with cruelly barbed, powered blades, and on the wrist were mounted twinned boltguns. His armour was covered in spikes; his Imperial badges had been replaced by slit-pupilled eyes that seemed too moist and alive to be of anything but flesh.

As befitted his arrogance he came into battle helmetless. His once noble face was contorted with an exultant superiority that bordered on the daemonic. Harsh red light shone out from the cowl of the Terminator plate around his head, a diabolical halo with no readily discernible source. With shadowed eyes he surveyed the carnage of the hall and uttered a single word.

'Cease!'

Such power was imbued in that command that all the warriors faltered. Green and grey armoured figures stepped back from one another, eyeing each other with unshakeable hatred. But they were compelled to hold their peace by Horus' word no matter how much they wished to fight.

Bjorn's strike halted in mid-air and turned aside. His opponents backed away. He looked to his primarch for guidance, expecting Russ to defy his brother's words and leap to the attack immediately. But he did not. Leman Russ waited, motionless, a look of such dismay on his face that it struck fear into Bjorn's heart. The Lord of Winter and War was decisive, a force of nature as potent as an ice storm, I unrelenting and merciless. But the appearance of his brother had ^

unmanned him. Consternation passed down through the Rout at Russ' hesitation. A tense calm descended upon the battlefield.

'Leman of the Russ, my barbarian brother,' said Horus. He lifted his claw and pointed a scythe-taloned finger. 'You disappoint me. This action of yours is suicide. How foolish you must feel, to throw your life away for the sake of loyalty to our abominable father.'

For the briefest span of time, Leman of the Russ' careful, contrived mask slipped. 'Horus, what have done to yourself?'

'I have become what I always have been.' Horus grinned. It was too wide and leering, not a human expression, but the smile of something else pushed out through a mortal face. It shrank back into his features, and his expression became sorrowful. 'Stop this now, Russ. Listen to me. I have learned the truth. I have seen the future. I know what disaster our father will inflict upon our species.'

'You have been lied to, my brother. Look around you, and your ship. These are not the trappings of civilisation you surround yourself with. It is madness! These items are worthy of Curze, not you.'

'They accurately reflect the truth of the universe as it is. To improve, you must embrace it. You will see, if you join me.'

Russ laughed in despair. '*You* have lost all sense. You are a traitor, you are a tyrant. You are a monster.'

'I am the loyal one, loyal to humanity! You still follow the wicked despot who forged us, eating His lies so eagerly. Do you not see, the Emperor cares for nothing but Himself. He would burn our species upon the pyre to fuel His own ascension to godhood. You are blind to it. He blinded you the moment He came to your world. Do not blame yourself, Leman. You cannot help it. I do not blame you. Join with me, and I will forgive you.'

'Forgive me?' Russ' laughter grew wild, and blended with disbelieving tears. 'I cannot join you! Brother, brother look around you. Please. Look with honest eyes upon what you have wrought.'

Horus' princely face took on an ugly aspect. 'I thought you would spurn me. You are a dog. You come when our father whistles, the brave hound that will attack whatever his oppressor commands, too stupid to know his master's quarry will kill you. On Old Earth, in the ancient days, there were dogs like you, set loose in packs to hunt wild swine. They would attack without hesitation, though many died, for they were bred without fear. Their natural form perverted to suit the whims of their creators. Like you. Like all of us.' He swept his burning gaze over the hall. 'But here I see no pack of fearless dogs, only a confused cur and his pups. You are the one who has lost his senses, my brother. Even if you were to come against me with all our so-called loyal brothers, you would be outmatched. Alone you have no chance of victory. Within hours your Legion will be extinct

and your tiresome, primitive culture will follow, for, my brother, I will see Fenris burn.'

If Horus' words were meant to provoke, they were unsuccessful. A look of calm certainty took hold of the Wolf King. Russ rose up from his fighting stance, and let the tip of the Emperor's Spear lower itself to the ground. He walked purposefully towards Horus, and the crowds of warriors parted to let him pass. 'You are not yourself, I can see that,' said Russ. 'You have been overtaken. Stop this madness. Come back with me. Let the Emperor heal you.'

Horus laughed. It was the throaty growl of a monster in a hidden cave that comes out at night to devour the young.

'He cannot heal when there is nothing to mend! Do you not see?' Horus held his arms wide, and moved down the steps. 'I am not wounded, I have been made whole. Before, I was but a pawn, now I am the master of my destiny. I will overthrow our father, and bring a new era of power to mankind.'

'An era of cruelty,' said Russ. 'Look at your warriors. They have become monsters, though not so much as their father.'

'Monsters?' roared Horus. 'I have seen the black future the Emperor will bring upon us. He cares nothing for humanity. The Great Crusade was a lie, Russ. He cares only for His own apotheosis. You and I, we are tools to be cast aside. He will let the souls of a trillion human beings burn to sate His eternal hunger. I know.'

'These things you say are not true. Listen to yourself!' pleaded Russ. 'There is still time. Stop.'

Horus pointed his maul at Russ. 'I name you a dupe worthy of nothing but death. However, you are my brother, there are others of us who fight with me, so I shall offer you the choice one last time. The Emperor told me, the day we first met, that together we could perform such marvellous things. He is a liar, but He was right about that. With you at my side, we can reshape the galaxy. We were the first to stand together - let us do so again, for the profit of all humanity.'

'A tempting offer,' said Russ insincerely. He gave a half-smile. 'Save your breath. You know what my reply is. Look at the things with you. You commanded me to strike Magnus down when you dabble with far worse.'

'You did strike him down, so very eagerly. You always were easily led. A hot-headed fool, desperate to please as any hound. For a scrap of affection you would sell your own life.' Horus grinned. A thousand boltguns were brought to readiness. He gestured at the strangely armoured warriors. They moved forwards, and it became clear their strangeness was not down to artifice. They had changed into things that could not be called men. 'These are my Luperci. They are a foretaste of what is to come. You look upon the true power of the galaxy.'

'I'm looking at a monster,' said Russ. 'I have slain my share of them. You will be next.' He readied his spear.

Horus gmnted thickly.

'So be it. I expected nothing else but your loyalist yapping, little wolf, but I was willing to give you a chance to embrace change. Very well. You will die by my hand. I take no pleasure in this.'

'As the monsters always say,' said Russ. 'And they say that because they cannot face the truth.'

'Do you think you can beat me now, brother?' roared Horus. 'Witness the power I command. Witness what our father kept away from us!'

Horus charged, propelling the many tonnes of his adapted Terminator plate into a thunderous run with ease. His giant maul he held high overhead, ready to strike.

Russ met the blow with a double-handed block, taking the mauls head on the blade of his spear. A shock wave of empyrical energy blasted outwards, knocking Space Marines over and tumbling them head over heels.

Horus struck again, and Russ staggered back.

Boltguns roared a thunder to match the lightning of their clash, and battle was joined once more.

Bjorn blinked away after-images. Alarms screamed from all over his battleplate. Uncanny energies burned around the two primarchs. They were heroes of myth, battling for the soul of mankind. In Bjorn's blurred vision their forms were uncertain, becoming something else - warriors in ancient armour, wielding bronze spears, or savage men from the dawn of time hefting giant stone axes, or two brothers grappling in the dirt of some forgotten village when men were few and the world vast. He blinked again, and the mirage was gone. Post-human deities duelled with weapons of unspeakable power.

A great saga was in the making or else a great silence. Should Horus win, there would be no more histories to be told of the Vlka Fenryka.

And then Bjorn was attacked by a gibbering inconstant thing only held in the shape of a man by its power armour, and he had his own battle to fight.

The power of Horus unleashed...

TWENTY-THREE

The Binary Of Loyalty

Cawl marched into the command centre right past Aspertia's guards. The domina was enmeshed in a cocoon of input feeds linking her directly to the cybernetic forces of Trisolian. Only half the subsidiary stations were occupied by adepts Cawl knew. The rest were attended to by members of the so-called true Mechanicum. A stink of spoiling meat came off them. He could see none of the newcomers' faces.

The room was totally silent. None of the holoscreens or pict displays were active. All of the occupants were connected to their commands by hardline manifold. The infosphere seethed with aggressive data cant. Strange sub code lurked beneath in hidden strata that made Cawl's implants prickle.

Fear roosted in Aspertia's domain. Cawl fought it back and walked in confidently, Friedisch following timidly.

A flexible arm bearing an electronic eye rose from Aspertia's robes to glare at Cawl.

'What are you doing here, Cawl? Why aren't you at your post?'

'I abandoned it,' said Cawl.

Immediately, the dormant skitarii guarding the door came online. 'There had better be a good reason,' said Aspertia. 'I have little patience to spare for you today.'

The skitarii raised their weapons at Cawl.

'There is,' said Cawl.

Cawl pulled an orbicular device from his belt: his masterwork. He flicked the sole switch at the top, and dropped it to the ground.

It landed with a metallic thunk. A burst of carefully crafted subversion codes blasted out from the cogitator inside. Immediately the adepts screamed and thrashed in their command chairs and fell limp. The skitarii lost their stiffness as Cawl's data-bursts brought their autonomous functions back online. Hesitantly, they lowered their guns.

'Query status,' asked one. 'Immediate input required.'

Cawl pointed at the domina.

'Domina Magos Hester Aspertia Sigma-Sigma is a traitor,' said Cawl.

Hissing pipes detached themselves from the domina's sockets as Aspertia shucked off her command harness.

'I should never have trusted you,' she said. 'Guards, kill him.'

The skitarii hesitated.

'Check the infosphere,' said Cawl. 'You will see. The Space Wolves make war on the Warmaster around this very station. The grand traitor Horus came here at her invite.'

'Domina?' asked one of the guards in confusion.

'She turned on the Viceroy,' continued Cawl, 'and gave him to the traitors.'

'Lies!' said Aspertia. 'Kill him!'

'I shall give you the truth. Exloading,' said Cawl.

He sent a data-squirt ripe with evidence of the domina's betrayal into the skitarii's minds. It took a fraction of a second for them to process. They raised their guns again. This time, they pointed them at the domina.

'Are these records true?' asked the skitarii.

'Absolutely. You can verify them yourself,' said Cawl.

Cawl heard the data-wheels whirring in the skitarii's head as he ran the check.

'Wait!' said Aspertia on all frequencies.

Cawl pulled out his volkite serpenta.

The skitarii opened fire on their mistress. Radium bullets smacked into armour plating. She reared up, and cut one of her erstwhile bodyguards in half with a focused particle beam that sliced through metal and flesh as if they were air.

A round caught her in the face, denting the mirror-metal and snapping her elongated head back. Cawl shot out the cybernetic link nexus revealed at the base of her throat and she fell down in a tangle of metal and cloth, leaking fumes from her joints.

The skitarii looked at Cawl. The tech-priest caught a little of the data traffic incoming to the warrior's cognis array. Sudden confusion had gripped the entirety of the Taghmata of Trisolian. Calls for aid and clarification went out from skitarii and thalaxii clades all over the Heptaligon. Without a word the skitarii departed, the curved prosthesis they had for feet loud on the deck.

Cawl smiled to himself. 'There, that wasn't so hard,' he said.

Friedisch had drawn his gun. He looked at the laspistol as if he had no idea how it came to be in his hand.

'How did you override their neurosync? How did you do all *this*?' Friedisch said, looking at the dead adepts. The smell of cooked flesh rose from their heads. 'And where did you get that?' He pointed at the orb on the floor, which lay there innocuously, activity light blinking.

'The code patterner? Like everything I possess, my friend, I made it. I've been working on it for some time actually, out of interest,' he stressed. 'I never thought

I would have to use it, but I was concerned by weaknesses in the Trisolian data-net and I wished to demonstrate how it could be compromised from within In the end, they proved useful to me. That is how I burned out Aspertia's command suite, set her skitarii free and slew these aberrant techno-mancers. The warriors of Mars will be able to choose who to fight for now. I imagine it won't be the Warmaster.'

'To what design was the patterner made? I've never heard of anything like it.'

'My own,' Cawl said defiantly.

Friedisch blinked at him. He lowered his gun to his side.

'Invention is against the lore for the likes of us.'

'Are you going to name me heretek?' said Cawl. 'I do not claim to be godly, Friedisch, but I am loyal to our deity.' He stowed his pistol in its holster. 'And I am going to save your life.'

'You killed her.'

'Do you think she was going to give us her barque if we asked nicely?' said Cawl. 'Now help me. Tez-Lar, roll her over.'

Tez-Lar stamped into the room and gripped the dead body of Aspertia. He heaved her upper torso onto its back; she flopped over like a dead fish, mechanical limbs clashing together.

'What are you doing?' said Friedisch. 'I don't like this, Belisarius.' He glanced out of the door nervously. The station had ceased shaking. The bombardment had stopped. That could only mean loyalist troops were on their way.

'We need her ship, so we need her, in a manner of speaking.' Cawl flipped aside the domina's robes, revealing the array of cylinders attached to her chest. Lights had come on the bases of all. A few were red, signifying the death of the contents. Most were green. Cycling lights ran around their midlines as cryogen cycles went into action to preserve the contents. He picked one of the green-lit flasks and unscrewed it from its ceramic mount. Milky liquid dribbled from the connector.

He wiped it away and took out a miniature suspension jar from under his robes with his free hand. He deposited the flask within the containment unit, and sealed the lid. Methalon gas swirled around the flask. He fiddled with the controls until the indicator lights blinked out an all clear. He breathed a sigh of relief, then he held up the unit to his face and regarded it avariciously.

'It's alive! Aspertia was right about one thing, Friedisch. Knowledge is holy, and she knew a lot, my friend. In here is a homunculus encoded with everything she ever learned. Centuries of data. Not all of it combat related, but a lot. She intended it to recreate her if she died, though I won't let that happen.'

'What are you going to do with it?'

'I can't let her knowledge die with her, that would be a sin. And if I assimilate this, I will be quite the general.'

'But how are you going to access it?' said Friedisch.

'How indeed?' said Cawl. 'Engrammitic exload? Neuronal scan?' He peered closely into the glass jar encasing Aspertia Sigma-Sigma's clone flask. 'I think perhaps there is a better way.'

'Cawl, what are you talking about?'

Cawl declined to answer and pushed the flask inside a holster within his robes, then drew his pistol again. For a moment, Friedisch looked terrified, as though he thought Cawl was going to shoot him to cover up his tech-heresy.

He pointed his gun at Aspertia's corpse.

'We don't want two Hester Aspertia Sigma-Sigmas in the world,' he explained. The serpenta flashed. The flasks burned with actinic light as he ruthlessly shot them all out, dead or alive.

Metal smoke and corpse fumes choked the room.

'Now, we have a chance to survive,' he said. 'We had best seize it.'

Bror lost count of how many cyborgs he had killed. They were the tech thralls and the skitarii of Trisolian, according to their badges. Horus was keeping bark his own legion, throwing inferior Mechanicum troops at the Rout. Bror snarled at the tactic. It was cowardly, no matter how strategically justifiable.

The pack fell back from the magazines towards the embarkation deck, cutting their way directly through the first units sent against them Alter that they took to the narrow ways, denying the Mechanicum's warriors the opportunity to bring their heavier long-ranged weaponry to bear. The Trisolian troops were augmented to the point of inhumanity. The few vulnerable parts of their anatomy were protected by internal and external armour. Their weapons were bizarre but effective, and there were thousands of them.

At close quarters they were no match for the Vlka Fenryka. The six of them kept the distance close, where their chainswords and axes cut metal limbs from bodies as readily as flesh.

'They are metal, but it makes no difference to my chainsword!' said Enrir joyfully, slightly delirious from the pain suppressants and combat enhancers his pharmacopeia pumped into him. His wound no longer troubled him, but he was going to be sore later, thought Bror.

'Do you not think they are behaving a little sluggishly?' said Ragner. He blasted a skitarii in the face with his bolt pistol, spraying a mixture of brain matter and dreuitry out of the back of its head.

'They are being puppeted by their masters, not just these tech thralls, but the skitarii too,' said Bror. 'Direct control.'

'Tchah! That's a poor wyrd,' said Enrir, as he broke the skull of another thrall with his spiked knuckle guard.

'I hear the poor bastards welcome it,' said Bror.

'It makes them lousy warriors,' said Flokr.

'Feeling chatty today, are we?' said Himmlik.

Flokr had said barely three words throughout the whole mission.

'Just because I don't think it worth speaking, it doesn't mean I can't talk,' he said, hollowing out the chest cavity of a skitarii with an upstroke of his sword.

I 'I sometimes wonder,' said Ragner. He shot down two more foes, Bror grinned. He missed the combat banter of the wolf pack, The Knights Errant squabbled as much as the Rout, but without the humour, or the friendliness, come to think of it. The gulfs between the Legions, and the pain of betrayal many of them suffered, made them bitter. He missed this comradeship.

They reached a crossway that was not on Broils map, and their I problems began in earnest.

A group of tech thralls milled about on the far side. The thralls were I not as dangerous as the skitarii, being not so highly augmented and I stripped entirely of free will. On each, one arm had been replaced I with a laslock that the thrall cradled with its remaining hand.

'I'll deal with this,' said Flokr. 'Easy meat.'

But as soon as Flokr moved into their response range, they reacted with unexpected alacrity and he was cut down by enfilading las-fire coming from both sides of the junction.

'Flokr!' shouted Himmlik.

'He is silenced for good in this world,' said Ragner. 'May the warriors of the Golden Halls accept his dourness better than we.'

Bror put out his head and looked round the corner. A strobing hail of las-bolts drove him back. 'Skjitna!' snarled Bror. 'A damn trap. There's enemy down every corridor.'

Free from the attentions of the Vlka's blades, the thralls opposite fired with impunity, and the Space Wolves sought cover in recesses in the walls as las-beams lit up all of the junction's four corridors.

'I could have sworn we came through here, and this junction was not like this!' shouted Ragner, leaning out from his hiding space. In the time it took for him to lean out and duck back, he placed three rounds perfectly into the heads of three tech thralls. The force of the explosions flipped them into their comrades, spoiling their aim and allowing Himmlik to gun down several more with an indiscriminate spray of bolts. 'This junction wasn't here before,' said Bror. 'And it's not on the cartolith.'

'How by the iciest level of Hel can a starship rearrange itself?' said Enrir.

'Never mind how,' said Gren, shouting up the corridor to his comrades.

'We have to retreat, try another way,' said Bror.

'Too late!' shouted Gren. 'There are skitarii coming up from the rear.' His bolter barked five times.

Radioactive bullets fizzed down the corridor. None of them hit the Space Wolves, and a lot of them ended up buried in the mechanisms of the tech thralls facing them. Nevertheless, the wolf pack was trapped.

'Damn it all!' growled Bror. 'Forward it is, then.' He tugged a frag grenade from his bandolier, flicked out the pin and rolled it across the junction.

He was already moving when it exploded. He charged blind, his autosenses whited out by the detonation and the secondary explosions of cybernetic power units. Fragments of tech thrall banged from his armour. Something more substantial than a las-bolt slammed into his greave, denting the metal. He swung blindly into the mass of tech thralls. His vision returned to normal as he cut a thrall through the shoulder, his chainsword's teeth kicking out a black spray of mixed blood and oil. He continued the cut down, carving out of the side of the dead cyborg, and brought the weapon around at waist height, bisecting another across the chest. A further one died to his gun, a single bolt emptying his ribcage of its contents. Bror's brothers were shouting and howling, boltguns barking deafeningly in the confined space. The tech thralls' close-quarter protocols kicked in, proximity to their fellows preventing them from firing their built-in weapons. They had no words, but the organs of speech were intact in many, and they mumbled idiot moans at Bror as they grabbed for him with their gloved left hands. He shot them, he cut them down, he kicked and punched and headbutted. Twisted wreckage snagged at his ankles. Oil-tainted vitae slipped under the treads of his boots.

His last bolt was spent. He threw the weapon hard into a tech thrall's face, staving in its domed bronze helm and shattering its glass eyes.

A moment later, his second weapon failed.

Black smoke poured from the chainsword's motive unit. The teeth jammed with flesh and swarf. He smashed it hard against the wall to jar the muck free, at the same time grabbing a thrall's throat and crushing it in his bare hand. The teeth spun through a single revolution, and jammed again hard, breaking the links and unravelling the track from its mount. Bror dropped the sword, and grappled with the thralls barehanded.

They pressed in on him. He tore them bodily apart, but there were dozens, and they pounded upon his armour with metal fists as they dragged him down under their combined weight.

A shot buzzed past his shoulder, blasting the upper half of a thrall into metal-laced gore. He tried to focus on his helmplate to see how his brothers were faring. He saw mortis runes, but his vision shook with the hammering of the thralls on his armour and he could not tell which of his pack lived.

His field of view was crowded with cybernetic faces and scrabbling hands. Decaying flesh left greasy smears over his eye-lenses. They were tugging at his power feeds, metal fingers prying under his battleplate. Finally, one seemed to process that their weapons could be freely used again.

With a metallic chink, a laslock pressed against his forehead.

Bror screamed defiance into the mouth of Morkai.

'Fenrys hjolda!'

He prepared to die. Abruptly, the pressure ceased. The Mechanicum troops stood back, stood to attention and put their weapons at rest. Bror leapt up. He tore the head off one of the cyborgs before he realised they had stopped fighting and become as motionless as model soldiers.

He turned around. Gren had joined Flokr in death. Himmlik was slumped against the wall, his bloody hands clutched over the shattered armour covering his stomach. Fires guttered in craters in the walls. A ruptured pipe jetted thick clouds of chilled carbon dioxide into the corridor past the Wolves. The glowing red eyes of Mechanicum cyborgs shone in the artificial mist, but they did not attack.

'By the third head of Morkai! What is happening?' said Enrir.

Bror pulled off his helmet and gulped down air thick with the stench of death and lubricant.

'More twists in the wyrd,' he panted.

A lone figure advanced down the corridor towards them through the battle smoke.

Ragner took aim.

'Do not shoot!' commanded Bror.

'I come to you in truce,' said the warrior in a flat, machine voice. He came closer, stepping out of the swirling gases. 'You are not a valid target,' he said. His crest and the insignia on his grey-and-red coat marked him out as a skitarii clade alpha.

'Then why did you attack us?' said Bror.

'Direct oversight from subverted command centres. You are not a valid target,' repeated the warrior robotically. 'You are Space Wolves, Legiones Astartes Six. Loyal to the Emperor. You are not a valid target.'

'Do you know where you are?' asked Enrir.

'I do not,' said the skitarii.

'You are aboard the *Vengeful Spirit*,' said Enrir. 'You were fighting for the Warmaster.'

The warrior fell silent. Tiny dicks and whirs sounded in his skull. 'Then our leader was in error. We were set against you without consent of this forge world's master. The moment of communion with the Motive Force is over. We have been reset to self-determination parameters.'

'Who is in command now?' asked Ragner.

The warrior was silent. The remainder of the pack tightened their grip on their weapons.

'I am,' the skitarii said.

'Then are you for or against the Emperor?' asked Enrir.

Again, that long silence.

'The Emperor is the rightful ruler of the Imperium. Kelbor-Hal is a traitor to the species. I am a loyal servant of the Imperium of Terra and Mars. I will fight with you.'

'What's your name?' asked Enrir.

'My designation is 978-1849700764.' He made the sign of the cog over where his heart had once been.

'That's your name?' said Enrir.

'That is my designation,' said the warrior. 'My name is Diort.'

'Diort,' said Bror.

'I have nine warriors remaining only. You are efficient killers,' he said emotionlessly. 'I will add our numbers to your own. We shall fight with you.'

'What about these?' asked Enrir, gesturing at the thralls. 'They would be useful.'

'These units lack the capacity for self-determination. They operate only under direct control of a magos,' Diort said. 'They are blessed to be so commanded, but the link has been cut. They will remain like this until issued further orders to act.'

'Let's move on before someone unfriendly reactivates them,' said Enrir.

Himmlik coughed. 'Not me, brothers. My spine's smashed. I'm not going anywhere.'

'Ah, you're not going to let a little scratch like that stop you, are you, Himmlik?' said Enrir. 'At least Flokr and Gren have the reasonable excuse of being dead for being so *lazy*.'

Himmlik laughed. It turned into a cough and pants of pain. 'Don't make me laugh, you bastard. I'm staying. I'm sorry. I wish I was going with you.' He pulled off his helm. His face was pale and beaded with sweat. 'I'm not dying with this pot on my head. I'll breathe free air and look into Morkai's eyes without lenses in the way. Don't tell me to put it back on, Bror.' Himmlik picked up his bolter from the floor and raised it over his head. Dark blood pumped from his wound. 'I can still shoot. If anyone comes this way, they'll have me to welcome them to Bel's halls.'

'Can we find our way back to the embarkation deck?' said Ragner. He was a superlative hunter. A question like that from him showed how lost they were.

'We can but try, brother,' said Bror. He looked at Himmlik. 'Until next winter.'

'Aye,' said Himmlik through blood-smeared lips. 'Until next winter.'

TWENTY-FOUR

The Wolf And The Warmaster

Russ and Horus fought with the might of cosmic force unleashed. In their contest the roar of avalanches was contained, the rising of seas, the eruption of volcanoes and the birth pangs of stars.

The brothers had sparred in the past, before Horus' fall and betrayal. Those bouts had no relation whatsoever to the fight they fought in the corrupted hall aboard the *Vengeful Spirit*. It was not simply a matter of the situation's gravity, that they were trying to kill each other now where before they had fought in friendship. It was a question of power. Raw energy blazed around the Warmaster. Every strike of his maul thundered with otherworldly magics, his eyes shone with daemonic light Horus had been an excellent warrior before his downfall, though not so accomplished as Leman Russ. That had changed.

Loken was right, Russ thought - he could not possibly beat whatever this thing was.

Russ was far from defenceless. His reflexes saved him from the maul's crushing blows. When the Warmaster's hellish minions rushed in to assist their master, Russ skewered them efficiently. His ability with the blade kept the Warmaster back, and for once he was glad of a spear's reach. The weapon lent him arcane power of his own. Each thrust arced with blue lightning that stabbed at the ground. Sheets of light trailed its blade as he swept it round his head to slash at his brother.

Where the lightning caught upon the corrupted surfaces of the hall, filth curled back and the warped decoration twisted. When the spear sheared into the unholy light surrounding Horus, it shrank away, writhing from the spear's edge. Truly, the Emperor had gifted him with a portion of His own might. It was a wyrding blade, steeped in the energies of the Underverse, a weapon from myth.

Russ whirled, keeping up the spear's momentum with a continuous series of rapid steps. The spear thrummed with palpable delight to be used. Its point shivered through gaps in Horus' defence. The Warmaster reacted to each attack, blocking them with his monstrous claw or batting aside the spear's shaft with his maul. Each time their weapons touched, violently coloured sparks fountained in all directions. They took root in ragged tapestries and upon the sticky faces of unclean artworks, so that wherever Russ and Horus went fires kindled. Within

minutes the upper part of the hall was ablaze. Warriors fought on in the flames. Space Marines twisted by the maleficarum of the warp struck in mad frenzy at Russ' Wolves. No more foes emerged from the hidden panels, but hundreds more Sons of Horus were pouring into the hall through the great gates. Parties of screaming mortals, many touched by Chaos' warping influence, hurled themselves through smaller doors towards the ship's stern. Russ' amazing mind kept a running evaluation of the haute. His Rout held the way back for now. There remained a single corridor of retreat running through the ship down to the embarkation deck.

He kept it open for his sons, not for himself. Russ expected to die. All he had to do was hurt the Warmaster. He was not sure he could do even that.

Horus had to see the truth of what he was. He had to know what Russ knew.

Russ drove in with a series of lateral strikes, swinging the spear like a sword. Horus parried with his claw, each dash of metal on metal like the peals of a bell heralding the end of the world. Russ howled. Horus laughed into the face of a cry that would have slain a mortal man. Russ' ferocity he found harder to counter. The primarch of the Space Wolves jabbed hard towards Horus' sides below his plastron, where the armour was thinnest. The Warmaster moved aside. He was lumbering in his Terminator suit, but anticipated Russ' attacks early enough to avoid them all. Horus' lightning claw punched forwards, seeking to rip Russ' head from his shoulders. The primarch moved - but not completely out of the way, allowing Horus to grab his pauldron.

Ceramite exploded into smoke. Slivers of the metallo-ceramic peppered his face. Russ' armour was that of Elavar, an andent design imbued with arcane defences. Its machinery responded to the damage, bathing Horus in a field of deadly cold, but the Warmaster was unaffected, and he twisted his gauntlet back and forth, working the barbs on his claws like saw teeth deeply into Russ' arm. The Wolf King gritted his teeth against the pain.

Horus smiled in triumph.

'You were wrong, brother, you could not best me. Now you will die.'

The Warmaster raised his maul to slay his brother, but Horus' arrogance blinded him to the Wolf King's ruse. As the Warmaster swung up the maul, Russ twisted free of the claw, shredding his own armour and flesh to force an opening, and with every ounce of his strength he thrust the spear one-handed into Horus' side.

A shock wave blasted from the impact, rippling Russ' face with its (bred he pushed on, grinding the spear through the outer layers of Horus' Terminator plate, into the armoured undersuit, through the body glove and into his brother's flesh. Horus looked down at the weapon protruding from his flank in disbelief. A thin sheet of blood ran down the glistening black ceramite of his plate.

'I do not need to win,' said Russ.

Howling, Leman Russ pushed again, plunging the eager tongue of his blade into the Warmaster's guts. Horus roared in agony, and his men faltered in dismay. His maul fell from his fist and he began to shake tremendously. His head jerked back and a blast of white-hot soul fire blazed from his mouth, cracking the armoured cowl curved above his head. Skittering lightning crackled over the two brothers. Violet light blazed from his wound, and the edge of the blade shone golden. It too was shaking, its edges blurring, becoming a spear made of nothing but light. Russ' arm shook painfully. His post-human muscles and bones went numb as he struggled to hold the weapon in place.

Still screaming light, Horus staggered back, releasing Russ in his attempt to dislodge the blade. Russ would not relent, and went with him, grinding the weapon in the wound. The Warmaster gripped the shaft of the Emperor's Spear, desperate to keep it from cutting deeper. The scream ended, the white-hot light of his wounded soul cut out, and he fell to his knees, head bowed.

When Horus looked up, the unholy aura had gone from around his head. The absolute confidence he had displayed a few moments before was absent. His flesh hung slackly upon his skull. He had aged a thousand years in a moment.

'Russ,' he said hoarsely. 'Russ, my brother.' He smiled. 'I have been unkind to you. You were the second. I should not have been jealous, but I was.'

'Horus?' said Russ. 'I speak with Horus Lupercal?'

Horus closed his eyes and shook his head. 'Leman, Leman, you have been speaking to me since you arrived here,' he said, his voice thick with emotion. 'I have seen it all. I understand. I had to do it. I had to. The Emperor is the greatest evil in the galaxy, but what have I done to stop Him? How many have died… Am I worse than He?'

'Horus,' said Russ urgently. 'Call off your warriors. Let us talk. I will take you back to Terra. It is not too late.'

'Too late, too late,' said Horus. He looked up at his brother. For a moment their eyes met, and Russ saw nothing but regret in his brother's face. Then Horus smiled, and the regret was replaced by triumph.

Horus took a deep, rumbling breath, the sort taken by men on the cusp of death.

'It is too late, Leman of the Russ,' said Horus. 'Far too late for you.'

'Horus!' shouted Russ. 'Hear me!'

Horus replied so loudly warriors on both sides stumbled and clutched at their ears.

'I hear you, and I defy you.' Horus' words echoed down the aeons, coming from a place beyond time and space. 'This universe will burn as countless others have burned before it! There can be no victory against Chaos. If you cannot accept its

power and its glory, then you shall die. The Emperor is doomed. I will kill Him myself.'

Before Russ could react, Horus punched forwards with his talon, slamming it hard into the injured side of Leman Russ. The boom of the claws' energy fields rolled out over the battlefield, drowning out the noise of battle. Russ roared with pain as the talon raked fresh cuts through his armour and gouged deeply into his flesh. The barbs ripped away chunks of muscle, the energy fields scorched his bones. With a contemptuous flick, Horus threw him off the ends of his claws, hurling Russ across the chamber.

Russ skidded to a halt at the foot of a profane painting, the Emperor's Spear clattering down beside him. Smoke issued from the rents I carved into the armour of Elavar by Horus' talon.

Horus grabbed the handle of his maul, forcing his heavily armoured body back upright. He gathered his dark majesty to himself again like a cloak. The haggard, suffering figure was gone. Russ could not be sure he had really seen it.

'So you were good enough, after all, brother. You could have killed me. You should not have hesitated. This weakness is what will cost our father victory. You so nearly won.'

Horus strode forwards, his maul raised to deliver the killing blow. 'When your soul is cast from you, and you are adrift in the warp, then you will know the truth as I do, brother. Before your essence is devoured by the gods our father denies, you will know you were wrong to deny me.'

Russ looked up weakly. Blood ran between his teeth. At least one of his lungs was punctured, and his secondary heart had been injured. His flesh burned with the efforts of his primarch's physiology to heal him, but his hurts were graver than the marks on his armour suggested. His chest was a mess of snapped ribs and pulped organs. The wounds were terrifyingly similar to those he had suffered in the Underverse, and he saw them now as prophecy.

'You can kill me,' said Russ defiantly. 'But you will never win.' Horus swung his arm down. A howling grey blur intercepted the maul, knocking it aside. A member of the Rout took the full force of the blow intended for the primarch. The maul pounded the warrior flat. Blood burst from the ruptured plates of his armour.

'You are wrong. I will do both,' said Horus, drawing back his arm to strike again.

But the sons of Russ were roused to protect their jarl. A second warrior ran at Horus, chainsword growling. The teeth of his weapon shattered on the Warmaster's armour and Horus swatted him aside, sending his broken carcass clanging into the wall. A third came, and a fourth, dragging at his arms to save their king.

'Your sons can die before you or after you,' shouted Horus, as more and more Vlka piled atop him. 'But I will kill you.' He shrugged off the press of bodies, sending their souls to Morkai with sideways twitches of his maul, but there were too many, and they would not stop. As Horus slaughtered his bold sons, Leman Russ dragged himself away.

Bjorn's world narrowed to his immediate vicinity, as the necessities of staying alive dictated. Wicked voices jabbered at him in a multitude of tongues. The titanic clash of primarchs resounded like a thunderstorm throughout the hall, but he was distracted neither by their struggle nor by maleficarum. He could not afford to be. He had attention only for his foe.

A screaming warrior in cracked green armour circled him. He flexed elongated fingers tipped with giant claws. He carried no weapons in his outsized hands. Large tumours split by puckered mouths forced their way out through broken plate, intimately enmeshed with the suit's inner workings. The possessed Space Marine wore no helmet. He would never have found one to fit, for the man's face was that of a giant insect blended with a simian's heavy features. Compound eyes and twitching antennae surmounted an ape's prognathous jaw. The slit of a second mouth ran off-centre where the warrior's nose should have been, lined with fixed, needle teeth. Bjorn could not understand how Horus' Legion could allow such an aberration to be. The Sons of Horus had destroyed entire species far less deviant than this. They had exulted in wiping out beings that did not match humanity's form, and now they allowed maleficarum to warp them into these *things*.

A lashing tentacle wrapped itself around his elbow. A second daemon-ridden warrior was attacking from behind. This second warrior's other arm was a pincer covered in tiny, iridescent feathers that snapped at his face. Bjorn took a step back, as much in disgust at the thing's appearance as a desire to escape its attempts to kill him. Its malformed mouth chittered horribly, and spilled acidic spittle from its corrupted Belcher's gland. Bjorn yanked hard, dragging the creature towards the waiting lightning claws of his right arm. It died messily. The second took advantage of his distraction, rushing at him with a powerful leap that knocked them both back. Bjorn's power pack collided with a Sons of Horus legionary. The traitor was sent sprawling. Another Space Wolf finished him with a downward stab of his power sword.

The first possessed Space Marine had one of its freakish hands clutched around Bjorn's helmet, the other pinned his arms to his sides in an enwrapping embrace. The daemonic Space Marine was incredibly strong. A tocsin pinged in Bjorn's ear as the ceramite of his armour creaked under the pressure, then cracked. Gas hissed from the hole. His helm groaned and gave, the inner surface pressing into his scalp.

Bjorn grunted, and flexed his arms. The possessed Space Marine's pinning limb tightened like a constricting serpent around him, but in the moment before, it loosened a fraction, enabling Bjorn to swivel up the barrel of his gun.

His chest vibrated with the explosions of a dozen bolts as he emptied his weapon under the warped breastplate of his foe. It shrieked and fell away, curling up like a dead spider, leaving Bjorn panting and covered in smoking ichor.

The pain of the half-crushed helm became impossible to ignore. Bjorn swore as he fiddled with the release bolts. Still cursing angrily he wrenched it off and threw it away. His braids came loose, snagged on the ruptured ceramite, and his black hair stuck to the sweat of his forehead.

The battle was shifting. He looked up the hall to where the primarchs clashed. An inferno burned around the stairs, drapery and artworks falling in flaming swags to the ground.

Leman Russ was lying injured by the wall. Horus was pushing himself to his feet, retrieving his maul. He was wounded too, but he had won.

Bjorn felt a terror he had never known, not even as a youth fighting to survive the endless dangers of Fenris.

The primarch was going to die.

'To the primarch!' a voice called. 'To the primarch!' Warriors abandoned their individual struggles with Horus' traitors, felling their opponents in their desperation to get to their gene-father. Dozens failed and were cut down as they attempted to disengage and rush to the Wolf King.

They ran at the Warmaster, hitting him with weapons that had little chance of wounding him, grabbing for his arms. They were like children trying to save their parents from an ogre, helpless against his strength. They persisted, dragging at him with their weight of numbers. He bludgeoned them aside, killing one with every stroke. Jarls fell as easily as warriors.

Under the cover of their assault, Russ dragged himself away. Horus disappeared for a moment under a seething mass of grey ceramite warsuits, before he burst outwards, sending the Vlka flying. The survivors got up and hurled themselves back into the fray. Horus levelled the guns attached to his talon at them, blasting them down, but more came. Hundreds of the Vlka Fenryka sacrificed themselves to save their primarch. The Sons of Horus were forming up around their master, adding their guns to the culling of the Wolves.

Bjorn howled in anguish. He broke into a sprint, gutting a traitor running to intercept him, shooting another down, determined to sell his own life to save his lord. All semblance of discipline had gone from the field. Neither side was operating as a whole. It was mayhem, as disorganised and deadly as the land raids Bjorn had fought in as a child.

He reached Russ' side a moment later.

Russ was still crawling away from his brother, half-conscious, his hand pressed at his wounded side. His shoulder was mangled and his battleplate red with blood. The Varagyr formed about him, presenting a wall towards the Warmaster and keeping the lesser traitors at bay.

Grimnr skidded down on his knees by Bjorn's side and lifted Russ' hand aside.

'His wounds are bad, One-Handed,' he said. 'We must take him away from here. We have failed.'

'No,' said Russ, his voice barely audible. 'We have not.'

'Horus still lives, my jarl,' said Bjorn.

'We did not fail.'

Bjorn and Grimnr looked at one another. Bjorn shrugged.

'We must evacuate,' Grimnr said. 'The day is lost.'

Russ nodded.

Grimnr switched to Legion-wide vox-cast.

'Fall back, in the name of Russ, fall back!' He sent pulses of coded information verifying the order as genuine.

Bjorn lifted one of Russ' arms, Grimnr the other. It was like bearing the outflung limbs of a mountain, but Russ managed to get to his feet with their help.

'Can you walk, my jarl?' said Bjorn.

Russ gritted his teeth, unable to speak. Bloody spit ran through his lips. Groaning with pain, he forced himself to take a step, then a second.

They dragged their limping primarch away as dozens of howling Wolves held the rear, and were massacred for their pains. The Sons of Horus pushed in from all sides, shooting into the press of Vlka Fenryka. The Wolf Guard walked beside the primarch, shielding him with their Terminator plate. Their energy shields crackled with deflected shots, and they gunned down the Sons of Horus as they attempted to stop Russ' escape.

Half a minute later, they reached the door that led deeper into the ship - their evacuation route. The four wolf packs who held the door were all shouting, agitated by their lord's fall. Anguished hands clutched at the Wolf King, hindering him in their need to help, and Bjorn was forced to slap them away. When they got through the door the fleshmakers came to the primarch, and Bjorn relented. Russ' arms slipped from his and Grimnr's shoulders, smearing clotting blood and sealant foam across Bjorn's plate.

Bjorn turned back to look through the door. The last of the rearguard able to do so were retreating. A semicircle of warriors were laying down a withering hail that kept the traitors back to cover their fellows, but they were falling quickly, and beyond them were over a thousand members of the Rout trapped inside the hall, surrounded by the Sons of Horus. Enemy reinforcements were flooding into the

chamber, attacking the Vlka with savage glee. The Rout howled and roared out their oaths, letting their savagery run free. They were doomed nevertheless.

'They are all going to die,' Bjorn said. 'It is glorious.'

'We have to move!' snapped Grimnr. 'The primarch's life depends on it.'

Bjorn was dazed. His limbs trembled from the efforts of carrying his gene-father.

'Come on, One-Handed,' said Grimnr. His voice was a metallic snarl from his augmitter, but he was speaking more gently. 'Now is the time to prove that you deserve the primarch's confidence.'

Still, Bjorn could not stop watching the slaughter of his brothers. Horus was massacring them with contemptuous ease.

'Run back to father, whelp!' shouted Horus, and it seemed he was addressing Bjorn personally. He plucked a Vlka from the ground, crushed him in his claw, and flung his corpse into his fellows. 'Run away like the cur you are!'

He was laughing as he murdered Russ' sons.

Then the door shut on the carnage, and blademaker Iron Wolves moved in to weld it closed.

TWENTY-FIVE

Wolf Cull

Bror's enemies changed in quality. No longer were desperate human thralls or mindless cyborgs sent against them. Now they faced the Sons of Horus themselves. At first they attacked in small units, perhaps because Bror's group was outside the Vi's main lines of attack, but after their first encounter word of their presence spread, and the number of warriors they faced increased considerably.

They fought through them all, charging recklessly into their guns, hacking them down.

Fall back. The order went out. It was delivered by Grimnr Blackblood, huscarl to the king. The wolf pack feared the worst.

Fall back. Unthinkable. The Rout did not fall back.

'Were we victorious?' Enrir was forced to shout over the battle noise. He had a fresh wound in his leg to go with that in his shoulder, and limped badly.

'There is no word whether Horus is dead or alive,' said Bror.

'We failed. Else Russ would have given the order himself,' said Ragner grimly. He cut down a Traitor Marine with his power axe and shot his boltgun one-handed into the chest of a second, shattering his breastplate and ribs.

'Brothers!' laughed Enrir. 'The passageways swarm with the Sons of Horus, and they do not have the desperation of men who have lost their beloved leader. Of course we have failed.'

There was a defensive wildness to his joking. The thought of their primarch dead chilled them to the core.

Diort's skitarii were down to three men. They fought well. To get past the traitors' thick battleplate they concentrated the fire of their projectile weapons on single targets. They were otherwise outmatched by the legionaries attacking the group. Bror and his brothers did their best to shield them from death, but one by one they fell, and the support they could offer the Vlka diminished.

Vox reports painted a grim picture. Strike groups attacked the fall back corridor in multiple places, attempting to break it down, isolate the wolf packs and destroy them individually. Horus had allowed them to penetrate so far into the *Vengeful Spirit* to trap them, that was clear to Bror. The Warmaster had exploited Russ' recklessness, though Russ had counted on Horus doing so. They were pieces on

the tafl board building intersecting snares. The situation looked hopeless, but in truth they could not tell who had succeeded in their objectives until the battle was done.

Bror fought like a great white bear. He had a new chainsword, liberated from the clutch of a dead traitor. Once the teeth on that were blunted, he intended to take another, and then another, until there were no more chainswords or no more traitors. Dying did not factor into his plans.

They blasted their way into a tall, domed chamber whose ceiling was ringed with fans chopping noisily at the air. A gas mixture that smelled of algal bed carbon scrubbers past their best wheezed up from pipes beneath the grilled floor. Bror slammed the final traitor in the face with his stolen sword's spiked guard, and shot him dead while he staggered. His brothers stepped in after him, covering the interior with their guns.

'There is no one here,' said Ragner.

'Not yet,' said Bror. 'Take a moment. Drink. Search the enemy for ammunition and supplies.' He pointed at the corpses spilled around the doorway to the hall.

The Sons of Horus had changed. Bror had seen them before aboard this very ship not so long ago, but in the interim between his visits their armour had deviated further from the norms of the faithful Legions. More of them sported spikes and hooks. Skulls hung in bunches at their sides, and the pauldrons and poleyns of some had been reworked into leering daemonic faces. Out of curiosity he removed the helm of one of the slain. He was not surprised to see the warrior's face had lost some of its humanity. If maleficarum could rework metal, why not flesh? The appearance of the traitors was altogether crueller than it had been, and everywhere the insolent, stylised eye of Horus stared.

'They have the look of the Underverse, don't you think?' said Ragner, lifting up the deadweight of a slain legionary so Enrir could pull out spare ammunition from his belt. 'How could they possibly think they are on the right side carrying things like this?' He flipped over a flap of tattooed, flayed skin worn on the warrior's pauldron. 'They call us barbarians.'

'All power makes tyrants, brother,' said Bror. 'They have been made mighty - now they use those gifts for themselves rather than for mankind. Do you think the people of our world would view us any differently than these creatures if they knew the Imperium could purge their world of monsters, stabilise its orbit and free them from lives of fire and ice?'

'I don't like your tone, Tyrfingr. The primarch keeps Fenris that way to keep the Legion strong. Do you want a planet of weaklings?'

'I am sure the weaklings would like to be alive,' said Bror.

Ragner growled. 'You've been away too long, tugging at the skirts of Malcador on Terra. You have gone soft.'

'I am merely saying, brother, that all we of the Legions are monsters. Some of us are more open about it than others.' He looked around the bodies one last time. 'That's it. We'd best move on. How's your leg, Enrir?'

Enrir limped to the closed door on the far side of the chamber. 'It hurts a lot, but I'm not going to follow Himmlik's wyrd yet. I'll lie down on the red snow when I'm good and ready.'

The closer Bjorn and Grimnr got to the embarkation deck, the heavier the fighting became. As they passed down the evacuation route, the Vlka maintaining the perimeter folded back on themselves, so that although casualties were high and becoming heavier, the group around the primarch grew in size. Explosions shook the *Vengeful Spirit* as demolition charges and fusion devices planted deep in the vessel went off, bringing ruin to vital systems. These explosions could be differentiated from the impact of weaponry upon the surface of the ship, being altogether heavier in feeling in the way they shook the deck beneath Bjorn's feet.

The flight back to the extraction point was a blur of flashing light, weapons discharge and screaming alarms. Ogvai Ogvai Helmschrot and Scarred Oki took charge when the remnants of Tra and Tolv joined their warriors into the group. What had become of Hvarl Red-Blade, Bjorn did not know. The companies of Helmschrot - Bjorn's own company - and Oki were badly mauled. The warriors that made it back to the escape corridor were wounded, their armour streaked with sealant foam and blood. The collective grinding of malfunctioning power armour became loud enough to compete with the thunder of boltguns and shrieking discharge of plasma weaponry.

Russ remained quiet through it all, gasping out the occasional direction to the warriors carrying him. When Bjorn tried to leave to turn back and fight the forces harrying their retreat, Russ snarled that he should remain. The primarch gave no other orders. Although the vicious wounds in his shoulder and side had ceased bleeding, and he was walking a little more surely, he remained weak. His heavy arms bore down on the warriors carrying him, forcing them to change several times as they became exhausted. The fleshmakers fussed around him even as they evacuated.

Cthonian war cries chased them onwards and downwards. Russ' party was kept at the centre of the fighting retreat, and Bjorn heard rather than saw their enemy.

They passed through areas that were aflame, others that were flooded. Gravity plating had failed in several sections, and the air was stale in more. Whether they escaped or not, the Wolves had dealt the *Vengeful Spirit* a grievous injury. Bjorn wondered if it would make any difference; such were the resources the Warmaster commanded, his vessel would be quickly repaired. Perhaps all of this blood spilt would gain the Emperor nothing but a few extra months. It was a waste of a Legion.

The sounds of fighting receded a little. They passed into sections held by heavy Vlka Fenryka presence. Wolf packs guarded the approaches to the deck, garrisoning captured fortifications and makeshift defences.

A closed airlock into the embarkation deck was ahead, wires trailing from open instrument panels plugged into VI Legion equipment. Neither Bjorn nor the primarch was wearing a helmet. A spare breathing mask for Russ' suit was sourced from the Iron Priests accompanying the Varagyr. Bjorn had none.

'There is no atmosphere beyond, you know that?' said Grimnr, nodding at the door.

'I know,' said Bjorn. 'I will stay here.'

'He! you will,' said Grimnr. 'Russ ordered you to stay by his side. I don't want to be the one to explain that his favourite wyrd-mark went off to a glorious end without his permission.' The huscarl removed his own helm and held it out to Bjorn.

'I will not take it,' said Bjorn.

'You will, because I'm ordering you to,' said Grimnr. His single eye squinted. Gunfire sounded from further down the line. The howls of Vlka in combat grew louder. 'Go on, take it!' he snarled.

Bjorn stared at him defiantly.

'By the Allfather, you are a stubborn *skjitna pjokej*. They are coming. You have to leave. Now.'

Hesitantly, Bjorn took the helm.

Grimnr nodded and slammed Bjorn hard on the pauldron. 'Good luck, One-Handed. This is where we part ways for the time being.' He racked a bolt into his gun. 'I shall see you soon. First I have a small matter to discuss with the Warmaster.'

The atmospheric recycler opened onto a large circulation hall, where refreshed air was drawn and mixed before being pumped around the vessel. It was a huge space where dozens of pipes terminated in arrays like the barrels of gatling cannons. They hooted softly, the noise of a pipe organ played by the wind.

'The lungs of the ship,' said Bror. 'Now this would be a fine target.'

'If we had the time, or the charges,' said Enrir. He limped across the deck. Blood and hydraulic fluid spotted the floor behind him. Ragner pointed upwards.

'More maleficarum,' he said. Some of the pipes had changed from metal into sagging flesh tubes that opened and shut with wet clicks. 'The crew is breathing air that has gone through that filth. Do you think that it speeds the spread of corruption?'

Bror shrugged. 'I am no gothi.'

'Would that you were, you would never have dared come back here,' said a sneering voice. A shaft of light snapped on, illuminating a deck raised over a set

of large sealed pipes. Upon it was a group of Justaerin Terminators dressed in black and gold, their plates decorated with eight-pointed stars and Horus' unblinking eye. There had been nobody there a moment before, and none of the tell-tale signs of teleportation to announce them.

'How by the Allfather did they get in here?' snarled Enrir. The Wolves reacted as one, bringing their weapons to bear.

A giant warrior stood at the fore. He had no helm and wore his hair in a high topknot. No one could mistake that figure. He was hated throughout the Imperium.

'Ezekyle Abaddon,' said Bror.

'I expected you to return, Fenrisian savage,' said Ezekyle Abaddon.

'I have gone to considerable trouble hunting you down. I do not like trespassers.' He looked around the circulation hall. The steady breeze lifted Abaddon's topknot into a long streamer. 'I don't see any windows an audacious pilot might shoot out here.' He grinned. The discolouration of his teeth was pronounced against his sickly white skin. Abaddon's physical condition had deteriorated since their last encounter, but he exuded an air of uncanny power. 'You will not be leaving alive this time.'

Ragner had his bolter up, aimed at Abaddon's exposed face.

Bror stepped forwards, his stolen chainblade held easily at his side.

'Then come down here and fight me.'

Abaddon shook his head. 'Not today, wolf. I'd enjoy the contest, but it would take too much time to kill you, and your master is escaping.'

Ragner shot then, a single bolt that roared on a tail of fire unerringly at Abaddon's exposed head.

It did not hit its target. Abaddon's armoured glove flashed in front of his face. The bolt hit the back of the gauntlet and detonated, leaving a small, smoking crater in the black ceramite. 'A good shot, but not good enough,' said Abaddon. 'Kill them,' he I ordered his Justaerin. Their weapons came up, rounds clicking into I place in their boxy combi-bolters.

Ragner died first, his last shot going wide. Enrir did not have time I to aim his weapon.

Bror was charging when he was blasted to pieces by Horus' elite. I The last thing he saw was Ezekyle Abaddon's smile.

As soon as the airlock opened onto the embarkation deck, the Sons of Horus made a concerted attempt to kill the Wolf King.

They came from all sides at once: from above, from below, from the side. Fierce skirmishes erupted at the large prow-ward gates, and from outside the ship came storming parties in void-hardened armour, attempting to force a way through the wrecked hangar blast doors and surround the retreating VI.

Two hundred metres across open deck, Russ' Stormbird waited for its master, its void shields still extended protectively.

The men escorting the Wolf King broke into a run, dragging at their staggering primarch. Gunfire streaked noiselessly across the vast hangar deck. Explosions lifted up from the ground in silent effusions of brief fire. Bjorn jogged alongside his lord. Sighting his boltgun well with one hand was hard to do, but he called upon the mechanisms of his armour to steady his arm, and a spray of shots punched a Sons of Horus legionary off a catwalk high above. A hundred metres to go.

The great prow-ward gates blasted inwards soundlessly. Huge chunks of metal rushed onto the deck, smashing down Vlka manning barricades before them. Bjorn felt the explosion through the soles of his feet. A blast of atmosphere followed, and the Sons of Horus emerged in a cloud of dispersing ice crystals, guns blazing. The Vlka were withdrawing. Already gunships were lifting off, the sound of their passage reduced to faint tremors. As they departed, they loosed their remaining missiles through the gates into the enemy. Lascannon and turbo laser fire tore up sheets of metal. Warriors disappeared in incandescent plasma sunbursts. Both sides suffered from the other's attentions.

Fifty metres.

A stabbing flurry of phosphor rounds blasted the fleshmakers escorting Russ. The primarch stumbled as the warriors died. Half his remaining escort dropped to their knees, snapping off retaliatory shots. The Stormbird's powerful engines were cycling up to take-off speed. Heavy bolter rounds cut up the metal around Bjorn, chewing the deck into a snarled mess. Miraculously he wasn't hit. Bjorn added to the covering fire as he ran. More warriors aiding Russ were cut down as they sheltered the primarch with their bodies.

A brother of Sepp fell dead at Russ' side. Bjorn took his place, his armour jarring against Russ and making the primarch wince. His face was bare apart from the breathing grille over his mouth, but although his skin had taken on a bluish tinge, exposure to the near vacuum of the deck seemed to have done him little harm.

Twenty metres.

The Stormbird's ramp descended. Wolf Guard appeared in the aperture, beckoning urgently, shooting over the heads of the running Wolves. Three warriors besides Bjorn were left helping the wounded primarch. One lost his leg and he collapsed, blood rushing from his severed limb. Another took a bolt-round to the back, frying his power pack and locking his armour. The third turned back, howling madly over the vox, gun blazing. A volkite beam melted his pelvis.

Bjorn was alone with the limping primarch. His jaw was clamped hard with the effort of bearing his gene-father. The Emperor's Spear trailed loosely from Russ'

fist He would not let it go.

Yellow lumen light shone from within the Stormbird, calm and steady against the frantic flash of the battle With a final heave Bjorn shoved the primarch forwards, and fell down through his effort. The Varagyr helped Russ up the ramp. Bjorn staggered forwards, turning back as his boots thumped into the ramp.

Horus had come.

His Legion was flooding the embarkation deck in a metallic green tide. Heavy weapons teams were setting up their guns. The first were already firing, targeting the fleeing gunships. A Storm Eagle took a direct hit in its port engine. Before it could adjust to the loss it dropped down and slammed into the hull's inner wall, sending down a fall of burning fuel and wreckage across the deck that went out almost as soon as it ignited.

Horus strode with impunity through the Rout, cutting down the sons of Russ wherever he went. Bodies tumbled head over heels from every strike of his maul. His claw macerated bold warriors into unrecognisable manglings.

The Space Wolves were quick to respond. Bjorn caught a screamed order tagged with a jarl's code ident. He didn't catch who it was, and their voice was scrambled by vox interference.

'Take down the Warmaster! Kill Horus!'

The Vlka's own fire support teams drew a bead on the Warmaster. Dozens, then hundreds of heavy weapons slammed into him. Horus leaned into their fire like a man braving a blizzard. Behind the dazzling light, Bjorn saw the wound in the Warmaster's side, wide and deep. A spear cut.

Russ had hurt him, after all.

More weapons drew a bead on the Warmaster, venting every method of destruction devised by human science. Bjorn saw beyond the glare of conjoining energy beams that the blasts were not hitting the Warmaster, but stopping short of him, as if they were kept back by an energy shield. No man-portable aegis could withstand that level of punishment. The force of shell, plasma and las-light bent around Horus, the boil-over annihilating his treacherous sons for metres either side. 'Maleficarum,' whispered Bjorn. It was the only explanation. In the last few years he had seen many terrible things, but only on Prospero had he seen a display of raw magic as potent as this.

A hand pulled back on his pauldron. Bjorn resisted, arrested by the sight of the Warmaster coming to slay his king. He had to see. The ramp started to close. Lift-off thrusts shot out pillars of fire, grav-impellers distorting his sense of mass. The Stormbird began to rise.

Horus trudged on towards the escaping vessel, his daemonic face, uncovered even in the airless deck, roaring his anger. His fury was a physical assault, pushing at Bjorn's soul painfully. Within the shimmering wall of power protecting

the Warmaster, Bjorn saw wicked things whose words were all too clear despite the lack of air to carry them.

Something was burrowing into his head, urging him to leap from the ascending Stormbird. He tightly gripped the pistons of the rising ramp.

'No,' he said. 'No.'

A hail of fire was coming at the Stormbird. A shell got through the void shield and thrummed off the underside of the ship. The flickers of las-beams turned aside by the aegis strobed the interior through the closing ramp. A Thunderhawk exploded nearby, shrapnel from its death bouncing off the Stormbird's hull. Horus pushed on, surrounded by his attendant swarm of uncanny protectors, shielded from all harm, while his warriors fell to the punishment of Vlka Fenryka guns.

Horus stared into Bjorn's eyes. He looked right at him. Bjorn was sure of it. A bleak chill gripped his heart, a foreboding of endless long winters to come.

Then the ramp shut. Vents gushed atmosphere, pressurising the passenger cabin. Sound returned. A pair of Wolf Priests were attending the primarch.

'Bjorn,' said Russ weakly. 'Bjorn!'

One of the priests scowled at Bjorn and beckoned him over. Exhausted, Bjorn crawled to his gene-sire's side, his lightning claw cradled against his chest.

'My jarl.'

'Bjorn!' Russ murmured. 'I could have killed him. I could have killed him.'

'My lord?'

Russ grabbed at Bjorn's armour with a weak hand. His eyes were wild. 'I hesitated.'

'Then all was for nought,' said Bjorn. A plasma torch burned hot close at hand as the Wolf Priests cut away Russ' fabled armour to get to his wounds.

'No, no it wasn't,' Russ smiled. His teeth were stained with his own blood. 'The spear tasted his soul, and I spoke with him. I spoke with him.' His eyes were drooping again. He was sliding towards unconsciousness.

'With who? With the traitor?' asked Bjorn.

Russ shook his head, barely awake. 'Not with the traitor. Not with him. I spoke…' He took a shuddering, rattling breath. Before he slipped away he whispered, 'I spoke with my brother.'

TWENTY-SIX

The *Silencia*

The Wolf Priests shooed Bjorn away from the primarch. When he tarried, they made it clear in no uncertain terms that he was not wanted there, so he made his way up the ship, past wounded Space Marines occupying every spare part of the passenger compartment, towards the gunnery and piloting stations in the foredeck. The ship bucked and shuddered, battered by hits to its void shields. A Sokar-class Stormbird was large enough to mount defensive void screens, but not big enough for them to absorb all the kinetic energy of the projectiles they displaced. Some always transferred to the ship. Bjorn was nearly thrown from his feet several times.

Eventually, he struggled up to gunnery control, where he watched over a blademaker's shoulder as he operated the gimbal-mounted heavy bolters either side of the ship.

Bjorn's mood was already grim. What he witnessed on the pict screens made it grimmer.

The *Hugin* sped through a battlefield of deadly wreckage and burning gas. The ship was not Russ' usual craft, and bore no markings that

would make it out as the transport of a primarch. It lost itself in the maelstrom, joining the flights of other ships streaming towards the retreating wolf fleet. A valuable ploy, but not a guarantee of safety. Horus' forces were deliberately targeting the gunships. Each successful kill lessened the number of the Emperor's warriors by a score.

The larger ships were faring as badly. They were breaking from the attack, leaving themselves open to the continued fire of their opponents as they pulled away. Few of the Vlka Fenryka's vessels Bjorn saw in the jumping pict-feed had much in the way of void shields. Those that had them at all were reduced to the low brandy fires that signified imminent failure. Too many vessels were bearing the hits on their hull's armour. The Vlka Fenryka's void fleet was dying.

A bright explosion whited out the screens. For a moment, the armourer ceased chasing torpedoes and fighter craft across the sky and focused on the cause of the flash.

'Skjitna,' he breathed.

Gutted by multiple lance strikes, the *Niddhoggur* detonated violently. A ship died that had fought for Leman Russ for two hundred years, that had survived the Wheel of Fire and worse, that bore witness to the terrible brother-on-brother battles of Prospero and the Alaxxes Nebula. The artificial star of its reactor slipped free of its magnetic bonds and enjoyed a fleeting moment of freedom. Smaller vessels detonated as they were overcome by the ball of dissipating plasmas, their own power plants igniting in a chain reaction. Overlapping spheres of light crowded out the ships in the sky. When they winked out, several vessels from both sides were burning and adrift.

The heavy cruiser *Grinunggap* was the greatest of these secondary casualties. Half its port side was ripped away, leaving the cellular structure of its decks exposed to hard vacuum. Oxygen fires burst in and out of life in its vented halls. The walls glowed hotly. It was like a paper model, half burned, its exposed innards glowing cinders. No guiding hand steered the *Grinunggap*, its command centres were open to the void and its engines out of control. With stately elegance, it powered away from the engagement, turning nose down towards the gas giant. Its death spiral took it into the path of the Word Bearers light cruiser *Vox Deus*. The traitor ship attempted to pull up, but instead raked obliquely along its flank. Locked together, the two vessels fell towards the deep gravity well of Etrian, and to their inevitable doom in its milky skies.

These moments were but vignettes in a greater tableau of destruction. Flights of Alpha Legion attack craft sped over the retreating wolf fleet, dropping clusters of bombs that bloomed like flowers on iron fields. Swift destroyers and torpedo boats dogged the Vi's heels. More ships of the Imperium named for the indomitable monsters of Fenris died in the void, their warriors and crews lost.

'Morkai's breath!' cursed Bjorn. 'The Legion is dying.' Helpless, he punched the wall of the ship, leaving a bright silver dent in the cream paint.

'Can you fly a Stormbird?' asked the gunner.

'No,' admitted Bjorn.

'Then you can let me do my job, One-Handed, without distraction,' muttered the blademaker. 'We are almost there. We are almost back at the *Hrafnkel*.'

'That will do nothing for us,' Bjorn said. He pointed at a tiny screen showing the stem view. 'The *Vengeful Spirit* is pursuing!'

Horus' massive battleship was coming about. Fires burned all along the sides and spine, visible markers of the havoc the VI had wrought within, but though it had been sorely hurt by the bite of the Wolves, it was still battle capable. Ventral thrusters burning hard, it rose up and turned to starboard, bringing its bladed prow into line with the Hrafnkel's escape vector. Its ram filled the small screen. Lance turrets trained their weapons on the fleeing Vlka Fenryka's flagship. A dozen of the largest were inoperable after the raid, but too many of them remained active.

Lance fire and short-ranged particle beams stabbed from the guns. An alarm peeped as they streaked past barely a hundred metres from the Stormbird.

'They're going to destroy the flagship before we have chance to board,' said Bjorn.

His eyes scanned the void battle. No other ship could threaten the *Vengeful Spirit*. There was none to help them, and all the Vi's ships were fleeing in disarray powering hard for a safe jump point. 'It's going to catch us,' said Bjorn.

And then, the *Vengeful Spirit* abruptly turned away. A spear of fire stabbed outwards from its side. Lights flickered all over the ship as power was disrupted by the explosion.

'A final gift from wolf to wolf,' said the blademaker. 'That looks like one of the magazines.'

The *Vengeful Spirit* fell astern, its immense bulk quickly shrinking into the night as it wallowed helplessly.

Bjorn was so focused on the aft view that their sudden arrival aboard the *Hrafnkel* came as a surprise. The ship's massive hull streaked past the starboard picter, and suddenly the Stormbird was landing, engines blasting on full reverse, claws banging hard into the deck.

Every door and ramp on the ship opened. Masked kaerls and Space Marines rushed aboard, struggling to get their fallen king aboard a casualty bier.

Bjorn followed the gaggle of grim-faced men out of the Stormbird. Gunships were coming in hard into the embarkation deck. The similarities between the *Hrafnkel* and the *Vengeful Spirit* were all the more striking now Bjorn had visited both in so short a space of time, but the feeling of the *Hrafnkel* was completely unalike the *Vengeful Spirit*, a sense of soul that went beyond superficial differences.

The *Hrafnkel* shuddered to a powerful impact. Alarms were blaring everywhere. Orders barked from multiple voxmitters, distorted to the point of incomprehensibility. A Thunderhawk came in hard, its tail section ablaze, landing claws tearing up fans of sparks as it crashed down onto the deck. One landing strut gave out, and it skidded on its belly into the arresting nets that sprang up to catch it. Damage control teams ran towards it shouting. Foamed fire suppressants gushed over its fuselage from long hoses.

Landing jets screamed like damned wights suffering Hel's miseries. The air was unbreathable with the amount of exhaust venting into the deck. Giant fans whipped up a storm, but did little to purify the smoggy air, instead churning it into an eye-watering brume.

Bjorn followed his gene-father in a daze. They were hurrying Russ out towards the fleshmakers' realm. Bjorn wondered if he should go with him.

A hand roughly grabbed the rim of his shoulder guard and spun him around.

'What by Hel happened?' Ogvai Ogvai Helmschrot ripped his helm off and threw it down so hard it bounced on the deck.

'Jarl,' said Bjorn. 'Russ is gravely wounded.'

'I saw that aboard Horus' cursed ship. How?' demanded the jarl of Tra. 'There was no opportunity to ask back there.'

'He faced Horus. Russ fought him. The Emperor's Spear dipped its tongue into the traitor's guts, but…' Bjorn swallowed. His mouth was dry and tasted of burning. 'Russ could not best him.'

'I never thought I would hear those words,' said Helmschrot in disbelief.

A heavy shell got through the void shields. The ship shook.

'Horus Lupercal is no more. He has given himself to the Underverse,' said Bjorn.

Helmschrot looked around. 'Someone needs to take command, or this retreat will turn into a massacre. I am going to the command deck. You can come with me, or not. I leave the choice with you.'

Helmschrot walked off, shouting for transport to the ship's nerve centre. At a loss as to what to do, Bjorn followed him.

Cawl and Friedisch's trip down from the command centre was fraught with peril. Bands of warriors from both sides roamed the halls, and since Cawl had deactivated Aspertia's control systems over the Mechanicum troops, the Warmaster's forces were killing whoever they came across. Cawl led Friedisch on a bewildering journey through the inner workings of the Septa tether. Friedisch had no idea that there were so many corridors and ducts crammed into the space between the outer ways and the great hyperway tube running down the tether centre.

The battle ebbed and flowed. Sometimes, the tether was eerily still, and Friedisch dared to think the fighting was over. Other times it shook for long minutes, and the adepts were forced to seek shelter wherever they could. Friedisch's nerves were shredded by the experience, but Cawl went on without pause or outward sign of fear, cradling Aspertia's bottled clone child as if it were a living infant.

When Friedisch thought their ordeal would last forever, or that they would die in the destruction of the tether, Cawl beckoned him to a circular grille set at eye level into a thick wall. On the other side the faint gleam of an atmospheric shield was detectible.

'We're in the atmospheric flushing tubes for the dock,' said Cawl.

Friedisch gave him an uncomprehending look.

'We're here,' said Cawl excitedly. 'We're in Aspertia's secret hangar.'

He pointed down. It was an awkward angle, but the grille afforded a view of a single berth housing a sleek barque.

'The *Silencia*, Hester Aspertia Sigma-Sigma's personal transport, and our means of escape.'

The *Silencia* was a small ship, less than a hundred metres end to end, but inside its modest hull were crammed all the necessities of warp travel. The outer hull was richly decorated with symbols of the Martian Empire and the Mechanicum. There were no guards.

'Looks like it hasn't been found yet,' said Cawl. 'If we're lucky and we're quick, we might survive today.'

They made their way out of the flushing tubes into the main access corridor. From there, they broke into a run, heading into the single-berth dock with what Friedisch would have thought as unseemly haste only a few hours ago. They crossed the narrow width of the dockside. Cawl walked as if he owned the ship. Friedisch cringed at being exposed in the tall space, and pelted up the gangway to the ship's main exterior door, dodging fragments of falling metal as he ran. Tez-Lar stomped after, shrugging off debris impacts from his reinforced body. Cawl's devices broadcast the appropriate identification markers, and the door opened to admit them.

They entered a narrow but opulent corridor. They were treated to a disorientating library's hush. Quiet noises of awakening machines and the servitor crew activating in their alcoves provided a comforting soundscape to the adepts. The clamour of war seemed very far away.

'Now, if I'm right, this ship has a minimal human contingent,' said Cawl.

'Are they still aboard?' said Friedisch quietly.

'Why are you whispering?' said Cawl.

'I don't know. It's quiet, we might be heard.'

'The crew might be here,' said Cawl. 'But I'm sure we can manage without them if they object to our presence, or if they are absent. I can't access the domina's data-sphere. I don't know where they are or if they'll be friendly, so stay vigilant.'

Friedisch unholstered his laspistol. He still held it like it might burn him, and he peered suspiciously about. Cawl glanced at the gun. 'Try not to shoot anyone unless it's really necessary. We're all of the Mechanicum. I am sure we can talk them around when we point out how hopeless the situation is.'

'Don't we need a Navigator?'

'Ah, now, that is a more pressing concern. There is one, a lower-ranked member of the Navis Nobilite in a sealed suspension blister, in the upper deck,' said Cawl. 'They'll be out cold. I'm sure that I can talk them—'

'You can talk them around?' interrupted Friedisch. He waved his lasgun around. 'You can't talk everyone around! What is this obsession with talking to everyone? You are insane!'

'You're being hysterical.'

'I am not! I am… I am…' He bowed his head. 'I don't what I am.'

'You didn't have to come.'

'No, I could have stayed here and been killed!' Friedisch wiped his sleeve across his sweaty forehead. 'A week ago I was on a nice, smooth career track.'

'War ruins the plans of everyone, Friedisch,' said Cawl sympathetically.

'What if they don't want to be talked around?' said Friedisch. As they walked towards the flight deck, the ship was coming alive. It was gloriously appointed, lovingly maintained. Functional parts of the vessel were framed like artworks, visible through polished diamond glass panels edged in gleaming brass.

'We'!! deal with it,' said Cawl.

They reached the flight deck quickly. It was small, fronted by an oculus covered by an internal steel iris shutter. In the limited space were three seats for a captain, pilot and systems operative, and stations for two supplementary servitor crew. All were absent, the manifold hardlines that would plug the crew in lay neatly upon stirrup rests on the desks. Tez-Lar marched to a servitor station and plugged himself in with robotic stolidity.

A powerful impact rocked the ship, destroying the illusion of tranquillity.

Friedisch flinched. 'Be calm! That was a hit on the hangar bay, not the ship,' said Cawl. 'But we don't have much time,' he added quietly.

Cawl approached the two forward desks. He looked from one to the other, and chose the leftmost.

'This one, I believe.'

'How can you pilot a void ship?' shrieked Friedisch.

'You are asking that now?' Cawl shook his head as he plugged the manifold feeds into input sockets in his chest and skull, and sat himself in the seat. 'Who do you think was going to do it? You don't think ahead, Friedisch.'

'It's been a long day!' Friedisch snapped.

'I can do a lot of things that you are unaware of,' said Cawl. 'Now be quiet. I've only read about this, and this is hardly a situation conducive to easy flying.'

'You mean you've never done this before?' whispered Friedisch.

'I believe I did just say that,' said Cawl. 'But I do know what I am doing. More or less.'

'Cog and hammer, we're going to die.'

Cawl glanced back. 'Find something to strap yourself into, if that makes you feel better.'

Friedisch threw himself into the co-pilot's seat and scrabbled at the straps until he had struggled the fastenings closed.

'Now, this, this and this,' said Cawl. His eyes shut. Machines hummed around them.

'You're not praying. Why aren't you praying?'

'Shut up, Friedisch,' said Cawl. 'Do you really think I've time for prayers? I've got a lot of machinery to speak to here.'

The ship rumbled as the engines came online. Instruments activated with a series of whistles and chimes, projecting displays on pict and hololith no one was present to view. The oculus shutter opened with an oily rasping, revealing a circular docking aperture ahead. The void beyond flashed with cannon discharge.

'By Mars! That's barely wider than the ship!'

A direct hit to the hangar side blasted a cone of debris in front of the ship's nose.

'We have to move now!' said Friedisch.

'What do you think I'm doing? Make yourself useful, retract the docking clamps!'

The engines rumbled. The ship remained stuck fast.

'How?' said Friedisch, staring at the bewildering banks of buttons in front of him.

'Direct communion! Plug yourself in! I can't do this alone!' Friedisch fumbled his mechadendrites into a data input socket. Unfamiliar machines demanded to know who he was. He bullied them into submission. A blast of fire erupted under the ship, swathing the oculus in flame.

'Now, Friedisch!' shouted Cawl.

'I've got it! I've got it!' he cried triumphantly. The docking clamp's idiot machine-spirit swam through the manifold into his grasp, and Friedisch commanded it to perform its one, simple task.

Open.

Three, closely spaced clunks vibrated the hull. The *Silencia* drifted slightly, until Cawl engaged the docking thrusters, and under his direction, the ship slipped free of its moorings. It veered uncertainly, and Friedisch held his breath.

'Now,' said Cawl. 'To space.'

A tangle of burning girders fell slowly past the voidward exit, accelerating as Momus' weak gravity dragged at it. The structure wobbled, and began to tilt.

'The tether is falling. We're too late!'

'Hang on!' said Cawl. His fingers danced with preternatural swiftness over the desk instruments. 'Not all that different to flying an aerodrone.' The ship grumbled. The narrow docking aperture rushed towards them. 'Liar,' said Friedisch.

Something banged hard on the ship, knocking the prow *off* course. The ship swerved dangerously downwards.

Friedisch screamed.

Cawl shouted inchoate words of panic as his intelligence core accelerated his reactions to superhuman levels.

Thrusters burned under the prow.

With both of them yelling, the ship nosed up into the docking aperture. Its keel caught on the rim of the door, ripping *off* its ventral comms array and destroying the projectors for the atmospheric integrity field that sealed air into the dock and kept the void out.

A rushing blast of air spat the *Silencia* out into the void.

'By the blood of the machine!' gasped Friedisch.

The void was ablaze. Giant ships slid past each other, blasting one another with planet-shattering broadsides. Friedisch called up a pict view astern, drawn to witness the fate of his home.

The debris choking the orbits of Momus and the mother planet Etrian was already being drawn out into bands of shining metal. A behemoth dragged itself across the sky overhead, the metal walls of its sides glaring in the sunlight. It was heeling over, fire burning on dozens of decks, a bright comet's tail of broken plasteel spreading behind it. Behind the *Silencia*, the tether of the Septa station was curling into itself, dropping down towards the battered surface of Momus. Septa itself was a burning mass that disintegrated as he watched.

The moonlet had been reduced in size by a third or more, the resultant swarm of icy asteroids clustering about it as if queuing to fall back upon the world.

'We nearly died,' he said breathily. Septa shuddered, and crumpled as it fell.

Cawl accelerated the *Silencia* away from the battle.

'Get the shields up, Friedisch.' 'We nearly died,' Friedisch repeated.

'Shields!' shouted Cawl.

'What?' said Friedisch, unable to stop looking at the carnage going on around them.

'Void shields!' said Cawl. 'Now. And this ship has an extensive stealth suite. Find it. Turn it on. Or we'll die.'

A trio of missiles blazed across their prow.

'I suggest you get on with it.'

The *Silencia* escaped attention as they fled. It was small and fast, and surrounded by clouds of auspex-choking metal. A few minutes later, its insignificant outline shimmered and vanished from sight.

Cawl breathed out a sigh of relief. They were slicing through the void towards the tangled pickets of the two fleets. With every passing second they accelerated, and the outer reaches of the sprawling battle flashed by. Friedisch stared in horrified fascination at the carnage.

'They're breaking away. The Space Wolves. They're running.'

'Good for them,' said Cawl. 'I wonder if they managed to kill the Warmaster?'

'How do you know that's what they were trying to do, really?'

'They are the Emperor's executioners, Friedisch. If I were you, I'd pay a little more attention to what is going on in the galaxy and less to your position in the Mechanicum hierarchy.'

'Adeptus Mechanicus,' said Friedisch pettishly.

Cawl gave him a condescending look. 'Now, of all times, you choose to be a pedant.'

Cawl stood up from the chair, and began to unplug himself. 'Right then,' he said. 'I suppose I'd better go and wake up the Navigator. A little bit of rapid edification is in order as to whose side we're all on.'

The *Silencia* was swift. In very little time they had passed far from the battle and the notice of the godlike beings at war there.

Cawl was right. He could talk the Navigator around.

Half a day later they were in the warp.

TWENTY-SEVEN

The Wolf's Eye Opens

Silence brooded in the command deck. Few warriors spoke. Not since the early days of the Crusade had the Legion lost so many of its warriors. Not so long ago, the Imperium had become supreme. The major xenos empires were shattered, the most dangerous human cultures tamed, and so the Vlka Fenryka had thought they would never take heavy losses again. Even now, in this age of treachery and pitiless war, when they knew the mission against Horus would demand lakes of their blood, the scale of Morkai's tally shocked them nevertheless.

The wolf of death was not yet done.

'We are still losing ships,' said Lufven Close-Handed.

He, Helmschrot and Oki had ended up on the *Hrafnkel* in the chaos of the retreat. Hvari Red-Blade of Sepp had somehow escaped the *Vengeful Spirit*. He and Skunnr of Sesc were present as hololith ghosts. There was no word yet on the other jarls.

'We will survive,' said Ogvai. 'Most of our vessels are nearing the gravipause where they can make emergency jumps. The *Hrafnkel* nears the Mandeville. What we have lost is gone. What we have still we shall keep.'

'This is a disaster,' said Hvarl. 'We run like cowards.'

'How many are dead?' said Skunnr. 'Does anyone know how badly we fared?'

'Badly,' said Ogvai Helmschrot flatly. 'My company is below one-fifth of its strength. I have thousands dead.'

'Mine also,' said Lufven.

'*Niddhoggur* gone, no word from *Russvangum*, three more capital ships lost. We are a tribe with a shattered fleet, far from the sight of land,' said Oki. His scarred face was haggard, his skin white.

'The question is, what now?' said Skunnr.

'Ogvai, you are senior. What are we to do?' said Lufven.

'Scatter, or consolidate,' said Skunnr. 'Those are our choices.'

'If we scatter, we might survive. We can run before the traitors. They'll give up pursuit in favour of bigger targets,' said Lufven. 'Targets like Dorn's Great Muster,' said Oki. 'We should be there.'

'We cannot go there,' said Skunnr. 'We are too weak.'

'I am not one for running,' said Hvarl.

'I do not mean to leave the foe in comfort,' said Lufven. 'We could harry them from behind, pick off the weak. We can help Dorn's plan that way.'

'If we split, we shall be out of this war,' said Hvarl.

'If we consolidate, they will catch us in force, and we are in no fit state to resist,' said Oki. 'We will be destroyed for good.'

'We are on the knife edge of death as it is,' said Hvarl. 'Russ made a bad choice.'

No one disagreed.

'I say we go out fighting,' Hvarl said, 'like wolves. I do not want to die like a cornered *forra*!

'Nor do I,' said Oki. 'Do any of us?'

Ogvai spoke. 'We shall gather together,' he said. 'We present a greater threat to the Warmaster as a Legion. If he pursues us, he will have to divert a larger force to kill us. If he fails, we will have the strength to threaten his rear. I do not care for petty raiding.' He looked to the others. 'Are we agreed?'

'Aye,' said Lufven. 'Agreed.'

Hvarl nodded. The others gave their assent.

As Bjorn watched the jarls a warrior joined him, and he was surprised to see that it was Grimnr. His eyes were bloodshot and his face blistered from void exposure, but he was alive, and he was ready to fight.

'I told you we would meet one more time, Bjorn,' Grimnr said. The huscarl's tone had moved from provocative to neutral, but Bjorn was too cynical to assume Russ' chief bodyguard was warming to him. 'How did you get out?' Bjorn asked.

'Only by wyrd's decree,' said Grimnr. He scratched his cheek where a tracery of broken veins inflamed his skin. 'It was a hard fight. Too many of the Wolf Guard sleep on the red snow. I should have died with them. I do not know why I did not. What are the jarls doing?'

'They are choosing where we are going to die,' said Bjorn.

By then, the jarls had a cartolith up, and were panning it rapidly from star system to star system, briefly debating and dismissing each. They all had their drawbacks, most of them fatal for a weakened Legion.

'What about this place?' said Helmschrot. He pointed his battle-stained gauntlet at the cartolith. 'Looks defensible, out of the way, but not too distant. It's a safe harbour. We can gather the fleet, and make a stand if we have to. We are well placed to threaten Beta-Garmon if we survive, and it is positioned close to the warp routes back to Terra.'

'Looks as good as any to me,' said Hvarl.

Scarred Oki nodded.

'Yarant it is then,' said Helmschrot.

* * *

A dozen members of the Dark Mechanicum worked on Horus' damaged armour. He refused to take it off, and the bravest, most ambitious of the fleet's Martian armourers had been called to perform the repairs. They were wise enough to remain silent, discussing the damage to the machinery of the armour via data pulse.

Horus stood with his arms resting at shoulder height upon a frame. His hands twitched with irritation. The adepts scuttled around him, probing at him with their tools. But as the crocodiles of ancient Terra allowed small birds to cleanse their teeth, so Horus forbore their attentions.

Darkness surrounded the Warmaster. The lights of his armoury were out, save a single shaft of red that illuminated his power-swollen body. Gushes of scented steam rushed out of tubes around him, benedictions to the twisted machine-spirits of his armour, and counterseptics for his wounds.

An unnecessary precaution. Russ had cut him deep, but since Molech his prodigious powers of self-repair had improved tenfold, and the wound was already closing. A dull ache in his kidney and an itching scar were all that remained to remind him of Russ' assassination attempt.

Horus lived. Russ' Legion had been ravaged, and he doubted the Wolf King would be in any state to fight for a while. Despite his victory, Horus was in an ill temper. He could have killed Russ.

A rasping fanfare announced an incoming hololith request. There were only a few men in his fleet who would dare to communicate with the Warmaster directly. The message would be important. The lives of those who wasted Horus' time were measured in seconds.

'Leave me,' he said to the adepts.

They bowed and grovelled and picked up their tools. Before the fanfare sounded again, they had vacated the room.

'Hololith on,' commanded Horus. A ghostly miniature of Ezekyle Abaddon manifested in line with Horus' eyes.

'My lord Horus,' said Abaddon. 'The Space Wolves are leaving the system in disarray. It would take little to kill them all. They are finished as a Legion.'

'If you want permission to pursue them, you have It,' said Horus.

'I will gather my armies immediately,' said Abaddon. 'The Word Bearers already pursue them, as do the World Eaters.'

'Reinforce your company with Alpharius' get,' said Horus. 'They will appreciate the opportunity to finish what they began at Alaxxes. Hunt them down, kill them all. I will have none of Russ' warriors left alive to bare their fangs at me, Ezekyle. And when you are done with them, bring me my brother's head.'

Abaddon's phantom smiled in anticipation of the slaughter. He began to outline his intentions, but Horus' attention drifted. The pain in his side swelled from a

dull ache, and his hearing dimmed. He shut his eyes. He felt weak, disconnected from the world around him, and an image flickered in his mind's eye, displacing his immediate surroundings.

He saw himself upon a vast field, fighting an endless horde of daemonkind. But he was not Horus the Warmaster, he was Horus Lupercal, favoured of the Emperor. This other Horus turned his face skywards, to where the Warmaster's presence watched, and shouted words that the Warmaster could not hear. His face was twisted in anguish and hatred, and a tremor ran through the Warmaster's soul at the sight of this other self. So many deaths, he seemed to be saying, so much betrayal, so many oaths broken.

'So much blood,' Horus whispered.

Abaddon stopped his gloating. 'My lord?'

Horus came back to himself suddenly. His eyes opened. Sweat trickled down into his eyes. He felt nauseous. Weakness he could never show, and he hid it deep within himself. 'Nothing. Destroy the Space Wolves. When you are done, re-join me. The moment to strike is upon us. Today, I shall send out a call to our fleets and our armies,' he said. The time has come to make our drive for Terra.

'We move on Beta-Garmon.'

AFTERWORD

Writing a Horus Heresy novel is the pinnacle of ambition for any Black Library author. When you're asked to pen one of these stories, you know you've made it, trusted as you are with the most epic series of books in the Games Workshop canon.

Wolfsbane is my second foray into Horus Heresy long-form fiction. Its singular focus on one primarch makes it a very different novel to *Pharos*, which has several subplots of equal weight.

Naturally, I read all I could about Leman, King of the Russ, before I began this task. He and his Legion have been familiar to me for a long time, of course - in the background lore and upon the tabletop. My regular opponent in the 1980s, who incidentally has become my foe again in this middle portion of my life, played Space Wolves back then, so I've seen their grey livery lurking on the far side of the battlefield many times. Long participation in the hobby meant that I knew the main events of Russ' story within the Horus Heresy, but the details were unknown to me.

I've come to the Horus Heresy at a strange angle. For many years, all my reading time was taken up with reviewing books. Rarely did I have the luxury of choice when it came to reading matter. Writing for the Horus Heresy has given me the opportunity, through necessity, of enjoying everything I'd missed.

By the point I was commissioned to write *Wolfsbane*, I had made great strides in catching up with the story of the galaxy's greatest civil war, reading everything I needed to and more besides, but certain of the Legions' arcs remained unfamiliar territory. Russ' Space Wolves was one of them.

I'm not telling you this to reveal myself as some kind of Jonny-come-lately, or cynic who does not read for pleasure. Instead I wish to share a little of my sense of awestruck enjoyment as I read through *A Thousand Sons*, *Prospero Burns* and *Wolf King*, among others. I'd heard these were good books, I'd been meaning to read them for some time, and anticipated devouring them gladly.

I was not disappointed. Dan Abnett's detailing of the Rout's culture and his descriptions of hand-to-hand combat were achieved with outstanding lyricism. Graham's excellent battle scenes and the sense of doomed arrogance surrounding

Magnus enthralled me, while Chris Wraight's race through the Alaxxes Nebula had me sitting attentive and silent (anyone who knows me, knows this is not me).

I came to my work fully intent on doing these earlier tales justice, continuing the feel of them, acknowledging the excellent flourishes given the Legion and, most importantly, honouring Russ himself, a man so shaded by many minds he has taken on the aspect of reality.

He and I got on famously. I came to love his impudence, his thoughtfulness and his loneliness. Russ is among the more human of the primarchs - so human he had his Legion find a way to get Space Marines drunk. Human enough to hide his ability and his wisdom to better fit in with his Fenrisian peers. Each of the primarchs is fascinating, and as I write about each one I find them deeply compelling figures, but of all those I've featured in stories so far, Russ is the only one I think I would wish to befriend, and the only one who might return the favour.

His Legion, too, are more human than many Space Marines. They are so grounded in the culture of Fenris they could not be any other way. Humorous, quarrelsome, yet mighty and noble, their legacy passes from their Legion to their Chapter in the wake of the Heresy, and makes them among the most relatable of the Adeptus Astartes. Like the Blood Angels, Ultramarines and Salamanders, the Space Wolves care. Though they appear savage, they see the inherent value in life. Their dogged belief in fate means they also see the inevitability of death, but they do their best to cheat it. And, unlike the other three Legions mentioned here, they're the only ones who'd invite you round for a drink once they'd saved you. Although if they ever do, I advise you not to sample the mjod…

We're many years and books on from when Dan Abnett sat down to put finger to keyboard and begin this grand saga. It has been a decade and more in the making, but we're now at a point in the Horus Heresy where the end is in sight. The branching stories of the Legions are braiding themselves together into one mighty thread. As Horus commits to his move on Terra, things that we have known will happen for a long time are now happening. One of those events, Russ' assault on Horus and his Legion's near destruction, is the heart of this book.

We are future historians, and like historians it is our job to make sense of these pivotal events, and construct feasible narratives as to why they happened. Why, for example, is Russ so neglectful of the Emperor's Spear? Why does he, against all good sense, strike out to face Horus one on one? We know these things happened. It is future historical fact. The why is the interesting part. The why is where Black Library novels come into their own, both in the writing and the reading. Writing these books often feels like an act of discovery rather than creation, an uncovering of true futures through the parsing of facts.

By the 41st millennium most Space Marine Chapters have an element of cultish mysticism to them, but the Space Wolves are among the few Legions that started out that way. Exploring their beliefs was one of the most enjoyable parts of this process. In a strange way, creating the part where Russ passes through Syrtyrs door to the Underverse linked satisfyingly with the sometimes oddly transcendental aspect of writing a book. Through the exercising of the joined imaginations of writer and reader, we create a kind of reality between us, somewhere new that is different every time the words are read, and somehow real because of it. It's a peculiar, sometimes frightening thought. A story is the safest way to explore such lands, for in these places lie the domains of the Erlking.

This, then, is *Wolfsbane*. May the saga of these bold warriors fire your own courage, and entertain you on the coldest of nights.

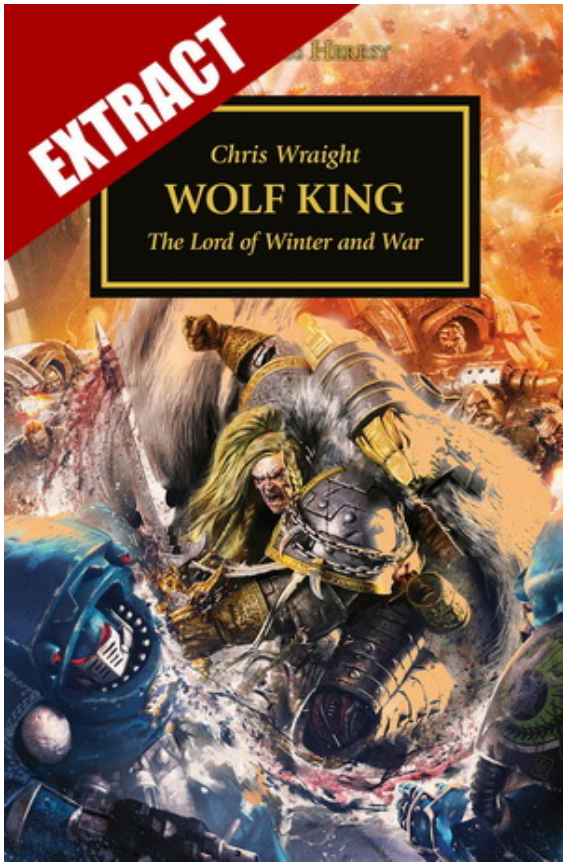
Fenrys hjolda!

Guy Haley,
November, 2017

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Guy Haley is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Wolfsbane* and *Pharos*, the Primarchs novel *Perturabo: The Hammer of Olympia* and the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Dark Imperium*, *The Devastation of Baal*, *Dante*, *Baneblade*, *Shadowsword*, *Valedor* and *Death of Integrity*. He has also written *Throneworld* and *The Beheading* for The Beast Arises series. His enthusiasm for all things greenskin has also led him to pen the eponymous Warhammer novel *Skarsnik*, as well as the End Times novel *The Rise of the Horned Rat*. He has also written stories set in the Age of Sigmar, included in *War Storm*, *Ghal Maraz* and *Call of Archaon*. He lives in Yorkshire with his wife and son.

An extract from *Wolf King*.



Three standard days previously, inside the Alaxxes Nebula – called the blood-well, the eye of acid – the Wolves had met in war council.

The Legion had been driven into the cluster by extremity, and only its extraordinary stellar violence had kept them alive to fight on. The gas cloud was vast, a skein of rust-red on the face of the void, falling into deeper and more intensive virulence the further one went in. Sensors were blinded, engine systems crippled and the Geller fields fizzed like magnesium on water. No sane Navigator would have taken a ship into those depths, save but for the certain promise of annihilation on the outside.

There were tunnels within, mere pockets of clear space between the great blooms of corrosive matter. The ships of the fleet could slip down them, guarded and menaced by the lethal shoals on every flank, hidden from enemy scan-sweeps and torpedo-rakes but open to devastating flares that punched through armour-plate and overloaded void shields. As they pushed into the bowels of the blood-well, the Wolves found that the capillaries grew narrower, more fouled, less open, tangled like nerve fronds. A ship dragged into the burning gas fields would be consumed in hours, its hull melting as its shield-carapace imploded and its warp core breached; so the Wolves ran warily, sending escorts out wide and running repeated augur-soundings.

No starlight illuminated those depths, and space itself glowed with the red anger of a clotted wound. The ice-grey prows of the *Vlka Fenryka* ships were as bloody as wolf maws. Every warship carried scars from the brutal battle with the Alpha Legion out in the open void. They had been ambushed while still recovering from post-Prospero operations; outnumbered and outmanoeuvred, and only retreating into the heart of the cloud had kept them alive to fight again. Many of their ships were now incapable of making for the warp even if the gas tides had allowed. Tech-crews crawled over every surface of every battleship, working punishing rotations just to get shield generators functioning and macrocannon arrays back online, but they would never complete that task adequately, not without the attentions of Mechanicum-sanctioned shipyards, and the closest of those was unimaginably far away.

So the Wolves were cornered, wounded and lean with hunger, forced into retreat by an enemy with greater resources and infinite patience. They were harried at every turn, driven onward like cattle before the whip, until the madness of confinement ran like a virus through the decks.

That was the environment in which Gunnar Gunnhilt, the Jarl of Onn, called Lord Gunn by his brothers and second only to the primarch, made his case.

‘They will run us down,’ he said.

The Legion command, a council of forty souls, listened intently. Russ himself had not spoken. The primarch was slouched in a granite throne, his true-wolves

curled at his boots, his ruddy face locked in brooding. Frost-blue eyes glittered dully under a mane of dirty blond hair. The Lord of Winter and War had not fought since the abortive attempt to summon Alpharius to the *Hrafnkel*, and the enforced lethargy seemed to have atrophied him.

Bjorn had witnessed that last fight, had seen his primarch take apart a Contemptor Dreadnought as if it were a child's toy. That power must still have been there, coiled deep, locked in his brawler's hearts even in the midst of endless defeat, but the surface fire had gone. Russ now surrounded himself with runes, listening to the cold whispers of white-haired priests and trying to divine the auguries like a *gothi* of old.

It was whispered, and Bjorn had heard the whispers, that the Wolf King had lost his stomach for the fight; they said that being kept out of the greater war had turned his mind, that the death of ¬Magnus haunted him and that he had not slept a clear night since the Khan had refused to come to his aid. Bjorn did not believe that and knew the whispers were foolish, but something, it had to be admitted, had changed. Lord Gunn knew it, Helmschrot knew it, as did the priests and the ship commanders and the jarls of the Legion.

'They believe us beaten,' Gunn said. 'That makes them unwary. We strike back hard, the fleet together, launching boarding actions to take out the lead battleships.' There were grunts of agreement around the ceremonial circle, lit only by the swaying light of half-cold fires. Above them all, looming in the dark, were totems from the origin-world – animal skulls, knot-handled axes, wide-eyed masks of gods and monsters – still bearing the marks of long-gone Fenrisian wind and rain. 'If we keep running, we will deserve to die here, skinny as starving dogs.'

Russ said nothing, but his fingers moved through the thick fur of the wolves at his feet. He stared into the heart of the circle at the annulus-stone, brought from Asaheim like all the other sar¬sens in that massive ship. Circles had been carved on its surface, concentric and spiralling, worn smooth by aeons, predating the Great Crusade by a thousand years.

'Gunn speaks true,' said Ogvai, adding to the counsel he had given before. All the jarls were united in this – they were tired of running.

Russ looked up then, but not at Lord Gunn or Ogvai Helmschrot or any of the others. He looked, as he so often did, straight at Bjorn. As he did so, Bjorn sensed the spark of resentment from the elder warriors, even Ogvai, the master of his own Great Company, and he felt the old mix of shame and pride that Russ's attention gave him.

No one knew why the primarch favoured him so much. For some, it was further evidence of the softening of his once-peerless battle-cunning. The rune-

rattlers and bone-carvers kept their own counsel, and Bjorn himself had never wanted to know the reasons, not least for fear of what Russ might have seen.

In the event, the primarch said nothing to him. His gaze wandered away again, and one of the two wolves at his feet whined uneasily.

‘This will be your fight, Gunn,’ Russ said at last. ‘Hit them hard, or not at all – they have the numbers on us.’

Lord Gunn did not grin at that, not like he might have done in the past. ‘It will be done.’

‘You have two hours, once we start,’ said Russ, distractedly. ‘No more. We break out in that time, or I’m calling you back.’

‘Two hours–’ started Gunn.

‘No more,’ snarled Russ, his eyes briefly flashing. ‘They outnumber us, they outgun us. We break the cordon and push free of it, or we fall back. I will not have my fleet crippled on their anvil.’

He slumped back into torpor. He had not said whether he would try to hunt down Alpharius again, or leave the bladework to his warriors. He said so little.

Slowly, Lord Gunn bowed his head. He had been given his chance, but the margin for success was slender.

‘As you will it,’ was all he said, his fists balled on the stone before him as if he wanted to break it open.

They tracked the Alpha Legion on long-range augurs for the next two standard days, gaining as complete a picture of the enemy formation as they could. Lord Gunn’s war council estimated that two-thirds of Alpharius’s fleet had followed them into the gas cloud’s heart, arranged in as loose a formation as the treacherous ingress-routes would allow. The rest had remained further back, hanging above the entire sprawling structure to ward against the Space Wolves escaping.

Precise numbers were hard to gauge, even across the Wolves’ own ravaged fleet. Comms malfunctions led to many smaller ships being misclassified as lost when they were still within sensor range. What was clear was that the Alpha Legion resources were far in excess of what Gunn had at his disposal, and their capital ships were in better shape too. *Hrafnkel*, the fleet’s lone Gloriana-class behemoth, had taken a beating during the escape into the nebula and would only offer ranged support to the break-out attempt. That left the line battleships *Ragnarok*, *Nidhoggur*, *Fenrysavar* and *Russvangum* to carry the main assault, even though the *Fenrysavar* was in only marginally better battle condition than the flagship.

The Alaxxes gulf presented tactical challenges: there was no space to spread out into the void, or to make elaborate manoeuvres. They would be fighting in the largest of the gas tunnels, hemmed in on all sides by the shifting curtains of

foaming crimson. The aperture's diameter at the narrowest point was less than two hundred kilometres – a claustrophobic space to be marshalling a battlegroup in, and one that gave almost no room for proper movement.

Given those constraints, Lord Gunn had opted for the one thing his Legion could always be relied upon to excel at: full-frontal assault, conducted at speed and with full commitment. The core attack from the capital ships would be supported by two wings of strike cruisers, each one aiming to power ahead on either flank to hem in the lead Alpha Legion vessels and keep their lateral gun-hulls busy. As soon as battle was joined, Gunn would give the order for massed boarding torpedoes and gunship assaults. The earlier encounter in the deep void had driven home the lesson that the Wolves' only real advantage lay in hand-to-hand combat, despite the self-evident risks of losing warriors to a more numerous enemy. Lord Gunn's aim was, so he told his brothers, to 'ram our blades into their throats, twisting them so deep their eyes will burst'.

No one disagreed. The councils were concluded, swords were sharpened, armour was sanctified with runic wards and battle-rites were completed. Being hunted didn't suit the Wolves, and the chance to turn the tables sat well with the Legion's bruised soul.

Late on the second day, as the chronometer had it, the fleet was put on high alert. The trajectories had already been calculated, responding to expected Alpha Legion movements. The pursuing fleet was allowed to close in through a gradual slowing of the main plasma thrusters, made to look consistent with steadily leaking containment shells.

Throughout all of this, Russ remained only part-engaged. He spent increasing amounts of time in his own private chambers. Petitions went unanswered. Soon it became apparent that he'd meant what he'd said: this was Lord Gunn's attack.

As the fleet chronometer clicked into the nominal nocturnal phase, trigger-signals were distributed throughout the Wolves' rearguard, alerting them to the imminent movement of the battleship-core. The trailing escort vessel *Vrek* reported augmented real-view sightings of Alpha Legion outriders at a range of nine hundred kilometres, and those readings were fed into the prepared attack-pattern cogitators.

Six minutes later, the order for full-about was given and the bulk of the rearguard executed a lazy turn. The slowness of the manoeuvre served two purposes: to allow time for the lumbering battleships to bring their forward lances to bear, and to delay alerting the enemy that a major reconfiguration was underway until the last moment.

Nine minutes after that, attack vectors were transmitted to all line vessels – battleships, cruisers, frigates, destroyers. Boarding parties were given their target-locations and sealed in launch tubes. As if in anticipation of what was to come,

the gas clouds on all sides throbbed violently, sending arcs of glowing matter lashing across the face of the cloying depths.

Two minutes later, the lead Alpha Legion vessels entered true visual range. They were already formed up into defensive positions, spaced evenly across the width of the gas tunnel to prevent a sortie slipping through. The closest signals were those of strafe-attack destroyers, all now bearing the scaled sapphire livery of the XX Legion. Behind those came the bigger vessels, the real targets: Dominus and Vengeance-class warships bearing the hydra mark upon their axe-blade prows.

Lord Gunn, standing fully armoured on *Ragnarok*'s throne dais, took in the final assessments of the enemy formations. His amber eyes glittered under grey-black brows, scrutinising the void as if he would twist it apart with his fingers. On the ranked levels below, warriors of the Rout looked up at him, waiting. They all knew that the last time they had attempted to engage the Alpha Legion head-on they had danced with destruction, and now every expression was tight with the need for vengeance, to prove themselves, to do *better*.

We are the Wolves of Fenris, thought Gunn, drawing strength from their devotion. *We are the executioners, the savage guardians.*

He gripped the iron rails, leaning out over *Ragnarok*'s cavernous bridge-chamber.

'Begin,' he ordered.

And with a void-silent glare of superheated promethium, the massed ranks of the Rout's battlefleet lit engines, activated weapon banks and powered up to attack speed.

First, flanking wings of strike cruisers leapt down the edges of the tunnel, overburning their engines in an attempt to hit faster than the Alpha Legion could respond. *Ragnarok* took the central dominant position, covered on all sides by four wings of escorts. *Nidhoggur* and *Fenrysavar* formed up in a loose triangle position on the battle-plane, angling to widen the leading fire-aperture to its widest point.

The gap between the fleets closed. The Alpha Legion formations remained static, each vessel locked tightly to the next by the range of their main macrocannon batteries. They made no attempt to match the Wolves' attack speed, but kept up a steady velocity, holding together in the classic lattice formation.

In void war, structure was everything. In the open void, a fleet's defence hung entirely on its overlapping formation. Every warship of the Legiones Astartes was ferociously, almost comically, over-armed – built to subdue the galactic empires of xenos, each was the equal of an entire world's sub-warp defences, capable of dishing out phen¬omenal rounds of atmosphere-shredding punishment from long range. Putting such vessels into geometric patterns in which every single ship

guarded the flanks of another produced an exponential multiplier effect, and thus Crusade war-fleets slid through the void like glittering predator packs, giving an enemy no unwatched facets and no open sectors. To break a settled Imperial fleet formation was a daunting task, and every shipmaster in every battlegroup knew the importance of maintaining the armour of numbers.

But this was not the open void. The Alaxxes tunnels prevented the most flamboyant outflanking figures, and so what was left was a test of speed and close-range manoeuvring, something that the VI believed gave them the advantage. Though they couldn't match the XX Legion's patient accumulation of territorial advantage, they could outdo them in daring.

So the Space Wolves outriders hurtled into contact with a kind of feral abandon, rolling away from incoming flak-battery fire, their lances burning like stars. The Alpha Legion vanguard fell back, maintaining their interlocked position, soaking up the first assaults.

It took only seconds for the capital ships to engage. Making use of the narrow channels cleared by the strike cruisers' runs, *Ragnarok* launched a massed salvo of torpedoes, backed up by lance-fire from its escorts and tightly packed broadsides from its own macrocannons.

That hurt the Alpha Legion ships. The volume of impacts, launched all at once, smashed frontal void-coverage and sheered adamantium buttresses. Gunn had ordered every commander to run primary weapons grids at overcapacity, running the risk of system overload but giving a savage punch to the opening exchanges. Two hurtling Wolves destroyers were lost in catastrophic explosions as their power-containment systems failed, but the resulting maelstrom compensated for their loss – half a dozen Alpha Legion ships were crippled or destroyed in the blaze, including a Dominus-class monster with the ident *Gamma Mu*.

That, though, was not the primary purpose of the attack. Hangar doors on every warship hissed open, bleeding oxygen into the void in plumes. Waves of boarding torpedoes burst from the delivery tubes, clustering and twisting before locking on to strike coordinates. Secondary wings of gunships launched while the mother ships were still at attack speed, shooting off on pre-planned assault vectors as the lateral batteries opened up behind them.

Lord Gunn had made his move, committing the fleet to close-range assault, and it lit the gas tunnel walls with sunbursts of thruster backwash. Powering towards the hulking monsters ahead, the salvoes of tiny assault craft screamed towards their targets, taking the slender hopes of their Legion with them.

Bjorn's pack launched from the fast-attack frigate *Icebitten* during the first few seconds of the assault. The boarding torpedo tore into the battlesphere alongside the others, wheeling and diving through exploding plasma bursts as the cogitators ran the trillions of calculations needed to deliver them to their target.

Locked down in his restraint harness, Bjorn saw the incoming ship-ident flash up on his helm display a split second before they hit it: *Iota Malephelos*. It didn't mean anything to him then; it was just another one of the swarm of escort craft that the boarding parties were aiming to take down, freeing the capital ships to open up with their main gun-lines.

With a sickening *crack*, the torpedo crashed into the vessel's hull, and Bjorn's world dissolved into a juddering chaos of white noise and follow-up impacts. The torpedo's prow smashed deep through layers of armoured decking, screeching like a banshee before grinding to a halt amid molten tangles of burning steel.

Meltas fired, clamps blew and the bow doors slammed open. The thunder of driver-engines, amplified by the close-pressed walls, gave way to the howl of escaping atmosphere. Bjorn ripped his restraints free, unhooked his bolter and charged out of the flaming aperture. His pack – Hvan, Ferith, Angvar, Eunwald, Urth and Godsmote – fell in close behind, their helm lenses shimmering crimson in the whirl of lambent shadows.

Bjorn no longer carried *Blódbringer*, the power axe he'd borne during the previous action, but now wielded a master-crafted lightning claw at the end of his left arm and bolter in his right gauntlet. The fighting was heavy, first against well-armed ship menials, then against the real targets: Alpha Legionnaires. The traitors emerged from the flickering shadows, their scale-pattern armour dark under failing lumen-strips. The pack wiped out the three of them, overwhelming in both numbers and speed. They stayed tight after that, sweeping down narrow feeder-corridors with the blood still hot on their blades.

More mortals were slain as the pack zeroed in on the objective, all members acting in concert, driven to a greater pitch of savagery by the burning need for vengeance.

The sternest test came just before the command bridge – an Alpha Legion champion in Terminator plate, backed up by a dozen more Space Marines and mortal auxiliaries, blocking further access amid the criss-cross ironwork of barricades. The legionnaire came straight towards them, chainblades revving under blazing combi-bolters. Hvan was blasted out of contention and thrown against the deck in a hail of shells. Godsmote ducked down below the volleys; his chainsword lashed out to bite, but was kicked away and crunched into a bulkhead. Urth and Eunwald slammed themselves back against the corridor's walls, launching ranged fire at the enemy.

The champion never spoke. There were no vox-amplified roars of aggression, just silent, efficient murder-dealing. Ferith was downed next, unable to evade the sweeping paths of bolts, his armour shattered into a network of blood-edged cracks. Angvar charged, and was crushed against the far wall with a mighty swipe of the Terminator's right arm.

Roaring death-curses from the Old Ice, Bjorn leapt out at the enemy. His four adamantium talons snarled into energy-shrouded life, harsh blue against the gloom around him.

The champion came at him hard, chainblades juddering in a bloody shriek. The two warriors crashed together, and Bjorn felt the raking pain of adamantium teeth cutting into his pauldron. He took a bolt-round close to the chest, nearly hurling him onto his back. He veered, swerved and thrust, twisting to keep his foe close.

He thrust his claw upward, catching the legionary beneath the helm. Lesser talons would have cracked and splayed, breaking on the reinforced gorget-collar and opening Bjorn up to the killing blow.

But these talons bit true. Their disruptor shroud blazed in a riot of blue-white, tearing into the thick ceramite. The claws pushed deeper, slicking through flesh and carving up sinew, muscle and bone. Hot blood fountained along the adamantium claw-lengths, fizzing as it boiled away on the edges.

The champion staggered, pinned at the neck. Bjorn twisted the blades and the enemy fell, his throat torn out, thudding to the deck with the heavy, final crash of dead battleplate.

Bjorn howled his triumph, flinging his claws wide and spraying blood-flecks across the corridor. In his wake came his four surviving brothers, firing freely, locking down the surviving Alpha Legionnaires and driving them back.

Godsmote, Bjorn's second, chuckled something as he ran past, but Bjorn paid no attention.

'Slay them!' he roared. 'Slay them all!'

His body pumped with hyperadrenalin as they rampaged onwards. He knew they'd been lucky – surely not many enemy ships would carry so few legionnaires – but the ecstasy of combat washed away doubt. The remaining levels blurred past in a whirl of slaughter, and soon the blast doors to the command bridge loomed. Bjorn, Eunwald and Urth crouched down at the head of the leading corridor, training their bolters on the doors, while Godsmote sprinted up, laid breacher charges and raced back.

The detonation blew the corridor walls apart. Bjorn powered up through the flying debris, firing instinctively through the percussive explosions. His pack-brothers remained close on his heels, and the four of them crashed through the disintegrating lintel and into the chamber beyond.

The bridge was circular, with the command throne in the centre and terraces and servitor pits arranged concentrically. The crew had had plenty of warning, and a hail of las-fire and solid projectiles zinged towards them out of the drifting smoke.

Bjorn vaulted over a sensorium pillar and crunched into a three-metre-wide pit full of mortals. He sliced his way through them, punching his crackling claw into

armour shells and the soft flesh beneath. Having cut his way down the length of the pit, he boosted clear at the far end and swung around for the next target.

By then Godsmote and Eunwald had driven a bloody swathe through the open centre. Urth's bolter-fire had downed snipers clustered in the high galleries, and he was now working his way along the terraced stations, ripping menials from their places and flinging them to the deck below.

Bjorn strode to the ship's commander, a mortal in Alpha Legion colours still occupying the tactical throne, his face white with fear. The commander tried to raise his pistol to his forehead, but Bjorn grabbed it, hurled it aside and seized him by the throat, lifting him bodily from his seat.

The man's veins bulged, and his fingers scraped frantically along Bjorn's gauntlet. There had been a time when Bjorn might have demanded information, for something that might unlock the Alpha Legion's mysterious strategy, but no longer. Too many pack-brothers had died, and his hatred was pure.

'This we will do,' Bjorn hissed, 'to you all.'

He broke the man's neck, taking his time to squeeze the life out of him, before casting the corpse down and crushing the skull beneath his boot.

Then he raised his claw overhead, threw his bloody head back and howled again. The rest of his pack paused in their killing and did the same, and the entire bridge of the *Iota Malephelos* – gore-streaked, broken, strewn with the slain – echoed to the millennia-old war cries of unpitying Fenris.

The two fleets grappled truly then, locked in close-range combat across the whole width of the cloud tunnel. Ranks of boarding torpedoes hit their targets or were gunned down, leading to a rolling cascade of brilliant explosions along the leading flanks of the Alpha Legion's protective cordon.

The only response from the ranks of sapphire was a steadily more concentrated pattern of counter las-fire, scything through the twisting mass of battleships to strike at the capital vessels beyond. No Alpha Legion ship launched its own boarding parties, preferring to hit hard at a distance. The inner core of heavy battleships drew together slowly, buffered by burning rings of escorts.

Lord Gunn watched the carnage unfold from *Ragnarok*'s bridge, searching for signs that the high-risk tactic had paid off. A whole swathe of frigate-class Alpha Legion vessels had been disabled during the initial assault and was now drifting away from the battle-plane, their hulls riven with explosions. Slate-grey gunships plied a devastating trade among the remains, swooping close to rake them with strafing fire from battlecannons and heavy bolter mounts. Combined with the hammer-strike volleys from *Hrafnkel*'s long-range artillery, the Wolves' assault had left the Alpha Legion's outer fleet badly dented.

Still the enemy remained static. They made no attempt to protect their outer ranks, and let the first wave of frigates burn. Dominus-class warships drove up

the centre, wreathed in flame along their massive sides, bolstered by fresh fire-support drawn from the rear of the Alpha Legion formation. Soon the volume of lance-strikes reached critical levels, sizzling through the void as if the beams could set it alight. With no room for flanking moves, the Wolves vessels began to turn clumsily, launching broadsides from their ventral batteries in an attempt to match firepower levels.

All across *Ragnarok*'s bridge, tactical reports flooded in, attended to by sprinting menials and relayed to the Legion's command points. Several boarding parties had closed in on their prey's bridges. Three light warships had already been taken, another six were contested and two more had been destroyed from within.

Slowly, Gunn began to realise the truth: the Alpha Legion commander, whoever he was, was happy to let his lesser ships die. The frigates were undermanned and poorly protected, bait for the infantry assault that he must have known would come. Nothing would deflect the onward advance of their capital warships, all of which were now training forward weapon arrays on the numerically inferior Wolves. Gunn's battleships could compete with them for a while, but not forever – so much had been thrown into the first wave, counting on the enemy not wishing to surrender its vessels and so compromising formation to save them.

He felt the beginnings of a foul sickness in his stomach. *Ragnarok* ploughed onwards, right into the heart of the cataclysm, all lances thundering. His shipmasters were piloting with skill, rolling and angling the guns to maximum effect. All around him, local space bumped and spiralled with the corpses of burned-out hulls, but still he saw that it would not be enough.

They knew I would launch the gunships.

Ahead of him, less than a hundred kilometres out, the Alpha Legion's core group of line battleships was drawing up into lance-range. None of them had made any attempt to shield the frigates in their line of fire, and from the power build-ups detected it looked likely they were planning to fire straight through them. They were bound to hit some of their own, though they clearly calculated that many had already been boarded and crippled, thus limiting the loss to the whole fleet.

It was a wretched philosophy of war. Gunn checked the chrono¬meter. Less than an hour of Russ's impossible deadline remained. Unless something changed quickly, his assault had no chance of breaking through.

'Increase fleet attack speeds!' he thundered, knowing how close he had already pushed them. 'Order all vessels to concentrate fire on the vanguard formation!'

It was not over yet. The two fleets were still grinding into one another like juggernauts, and a random warp-core breach or sudden loss of nerve could still

turn the tide. All around them, lit up by the flares and bursts of las-fire, the boiling heart of Alaxxes pressed in, seething like the nine hearts of Hel. The Alpha Legion advanced before it, as cold and calm as machines.

‘Break them!’ Lord Gunn roared, his whole voice shaking with the wrath that burned up from his hearts, his gauntlets clenched tight. ‘By the Allfather, by immortal Fenris, *break them!*’

The last of the defenders on *Iota Malephelos* were slaughtered, the control systems taken over and the whole place had begun to stink of still-hot blood.

Godsmote strode over to one of the sensorium consoles and looked down the list of incoming signals. ‘*Fekke*,’ he swore, watching the pinpoints of light dance.

Bjorn looked out of the bridge’s cracked real-view portal and saw the ruddy void beyond scored with explosions. Local space was clogged with the arcs and crackles of energy-release ripping into gargantuan void-craft with an eerie, deceptive silence. Even as he watched, the burning hulk of a strike cruiser bearing Alpha Legion markings tumbled across the visual field, its spine broken, saviour pods shedding from its underbelly like spawn released into the ocean.

‘Status,’ he demanded, moving over to Godsmote’s position. Eunwald and Urth took up guard by the broken doorway, reloading their bolters.

‘It is Hel,’ said Godsmote, sounding impressed.

Bjorn only needed to glance at the tactical scope to see that he was right. Lord Gunn’s manoeuvre already had no chance of success. The Alpha Legion cordon across the gas tunnel held firm, bolstered by their willingness to let their outer flanks be ripped away. Bjorn suddenly saw why their seizure of *Iota Malephelos* had been so easy: the enemy had husbanded their strength, allowing the Wolves to expend theirs on weaker outriders. Waves of boarding actions had taken out much of the protective aegis of smaller ships, but not enough to seriously expose the main formations of capital vessels.

Russvangum and *Ragnarok* had waded into the heart of the battle, their flanks blazing with broadsides, surrounded by the vast cordon of the Alaxxes blood-well’s lethal blooms. *Hrafnkel* stood further back, launching barrage after barrage of torpedoes, hammering a path towards the enemy’s heart in a cascade of smouldering, broken ship-spines, but it was all too slow, and all too blunt.

The Alpha Legion held the advantage. They could afford to lose two ships for every one Space Wolf vessel, and they played the game well. Lord Gunn had driven the Rout vanguard hard, knowing they needed to gouge a hole in the defensive wall and knock the supporting vessels out of position. He’d almost done it in one sector – *Ragnarok* had taken apart its nearest rival, a leviathan named the *Theta*, and was continuing to power up the very heart of the battlesphere with all cannons spitting.

But several dozen Alpha Legion ships had the ident *Theta* – every¬thing was repeated, referenced and double-signalled, which was another hateful mark of the XX – and it made no difference to the tactical situation. The Wolves had not established positional dominance, and were now at the mercy of greater ship concentrations. Beyond the darkening mass of this particular *Theta*, more battleships were already lumbering into position, supported by new wings of escorts. The Wolves could not muster anything like that discipline, and with their warriors spread thin in disruptive operations, the shackles of the Alaxxes tunnel edges prevented anything other than a frontal assault they were now ill-equipped to maintain.

‘He will take us back,’ muttered Bjorn, seeing the inevitability of it.

‘We will never get a better chance,’ said Godsmote.

He was right. If they failed to break out now, all that remained was to be driven deeper in, where the void corridors would narrow further, restricting their options down to nothing. They would be hounded, day after day, until death came for them in petty battles conducted at long range.

A poor way to die.

Bjorn strode over to the command throne, kicking aside the broken-necked corpse in the way. He summoned up trajectory readings for the frigate, overrode them and punched in new orders.

‘This isn’t over yet,’ he growled, sweeping his helm lenses across the devastated bridge. ‘Find a comms station. Prepare new allegiance codes for *Ragnarok*.’

The *Iota Malephelos* swung around hard, angling towards the closest Alpha Legion vessel, a frigate bearing the mark *Keta Rho*. The ship was fully occupied running up close to a Wolves formation led by the strike cruiser *Runeblade*, and its main lance was powering up for the strike. All around them, a thousand other battles were playing out, studded amid a maelstrom of flaring cannon discharge.

The weapon-control console on *Iota Malephelos* was almost exactly the same as the one on *Helridder*, bar the variant sigils. The irony of this war was its awful familiarity – they were fighting with the same weapons, in the same way, with the same commitment.

The *Keta Rho* swam into the real-view portal, still powering along the same trajectory towards its target, and Bjorn unlocked the codes he needed. Hundreds of metres below him, the broadside batteries slammed open, primed for firing.

‘They have detected our course change,’ reported Godsmote.

‘Too late,’ said Bjorn, activating the gunnery release.

Iota Malephelos continued on its trajectory, flying clumsily now that the secondary guidance crews were all dead, and launched its full payload at the *Keta Rho*. The space around it sizzled with coruscation as the guns all fired at once,

hurling a storm of ship-killing shells across the narrowing gap between them. *Keta Rho* attempted evasive action at the last moment, but it was too close to escape. In a series of sharp impacts, its facing flank was peppered with cannon bursts, shattering the void shields and penetrating down to the hull plates below.

Immediately, other Alpha Legion vessels started to home in on *Iota Malephelos*'s position, now alive to the switch of allegiance.

'Come about for another pass,' said Bjorn, watching the tactical display fill with enemy signals and wondering how long they'd last.

Godsmote made the adjustments just as the chronometer hit the two-hour mark. Almost instantly, the fallback order came over the fleet comm.

Lord Gunn had had enough – even he wouldn't see the fleet ripped apart to salvage his pride. All across the battlesphere, assault rams, boarding boats and gunships would already be streaking back to their hangars, covered by whatever escorts had survived the initial melee.

The *Keta Rho* still lived, and was turning to bring its own weapons to bear. Six other enemy ships were hurrying up from the starboard nadir, all zeroing in on the *Iota Malephelos*.

'What are your orders?' asked Godsmote.

Bjorn didn't need to look at the tactical displays to know what he needed to do. It made him sick to contemplate it, but there were no alternatives.

'Broadcast the new ident,' he snarled, tasting – again – the pain of retreat. 'Then full-burn, back with the rest.'

Gunn remained at the helm of *Ragnarok*, glaring grimly out across the bridge of the enormous battleship. Below him, ranked across the dozens of terraces radiating out from the command dais, hund¬reds of mortals and servitors struggled to enact the withdrawal command without getting the ship destroyed. Alpha Legion vessels streaked in from every direction, now at full velocity, aiming to pierce the outer defensive shell and get in among the more damaged warships.

'Maintain the perimeter,' warned Gunn, flagging up a weakness in the sector held by *Fenrysavar*. 'Get the gunships landed. *Skítja*, we need to pull those torpedoes *out*.'

The entire Wolves fleet was contracting, pulling in on itself and swivelling into retreat trajectories. It was a dangerous time, risking exposing the battleships' flanks before they could power up to full speed again. Some captured vessels were responding to the command, but not enough to replace those lost in the fury of the counter-assault. The claustrophobic dimensions of the gas tunnel hindered them further, since straying into its margins would be as catastrophic as a full lance-battery strike, so everything was tight, constricted by the volume of incoming fire as well as the collapsing dimensions of the battlesphere.

Gunn glanced down at the full-range hololith, noting the positions of the battleships. The *Hrafnkel* had remained in the centre of the formation, somehow eking out even more ranged support from its ravaged gun batteries; it was the linchpin around which the rest of the fleet was turning.

He stared at the flickering image before him, feeling a kind of hatred for it. The primarch was aboard that ship, lurking in his chambers, lost in a surly indifference. He should have been *here*, leading the charge. Lord Gunn was a veteran of centuries of warfare, but was under no illusions about the disparity in shipmastery between the two of them. Perhaps Russ could have done it. He'd have summoned up something, dragged out from the depths and hurled into the enemy's treacherous faces. That was what he was *for* – to do the impossible, to haul the Legion out of the mire and set it loping back into the hunt.

'Lord, the fleet is pulling clear,' reported *Ragnarok*'s navigation master. 'Trajectory has been set – are we joining them?'

Even as the man spoke, fresh shudders radiated up from *Rag¬narok*'s bowels. More impacts followed – solid rounds, torpedoes, las-bursts, all raking along shield-arcs that were already close to failing. If Gunn closed his eyes he could feel the ship's agony, cut with a thousand wounds and bleeding into the vacuum.

He could order a final charge. He could send the battleship surging into the oncoming Alpha Legion vanguard, destroying as much of it as he could before they snapped the ship's neck at last. They might even board before the end, and he'd die like a warrior, the corpses of his enemies piled high around him on the command bridge.

Then I would slay with a smile, he thought.

'Pull away,' Gunn ordered, forcing the words out. 'Cover the retreat. Maintain ordnance barrage. We will be the last to fall back.'

Then he turned, his huge shoulders a fraction lower, and looked away from the forward oculus, sickened by it.

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